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**RMIT UNIVERSITY**

**FACULTY OF ART, DESIGN AND COMMUNICATION**

**MASTER OF ARTS (CREATIVE WRITING)**

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**EXEGESIS TITLE:**

**THE NATURE OF HUMAN ANIMAL RELATIONSHIPS  
IN THREE MODERN LITERARY FAIRY TALES.**

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**EXEGESIS LENGTH:    15,000 WORDS**

**SUBMISSION DATE:    31 AUGUST 2006**

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## INTRODUCTION

Humans and animals have formed powerful bonds across cultures and throughout history, in real life and in storytelling. Forming relationships with animals has been a fundamental part of the human experience around the globe and literature is filled with descriptions and imaginings of human and animal interaction. Human animal relationships appear in a wide range of literary genres, and the nature of the bonds formed between human and animal characters in literature is intriguingly diverse.

This exegesis aims to identify and discuss the nature of human animal relationships in three modern literary fairy tales. This will be achieved through comparative analysis of the central human and animal relationships in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, Peter Heg's *Woman and the Ape*, and my own writing project, *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*.

The exegesis seeks to identify and discuss the roles and functions the human and animal characters perform in the three modern literary fairy tales, the types of transformation the human and animal characters undergo as a result of their interaction, and the multi-dimensional nature of the bonds formed between the human and animal characters.

The first chapter of the exegesis will analyse and discuss the roles and functions the human and animal characters perform in the three texts. The chapter will firstly consider the extent to which the human and animal characters perform similar roles and functions to their counterparts in traditional oral folk tales. This will be achieved through a comparative analysis of the roles and functions the human and animal characters perform in the three chosen texts with the narrative theories relating to folk

tales developed by early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian Structuralist, Vladimir Propp. The chapter will discuss the extent to which the central human and animal characters in the three modern literary fairy tales perform Propp's archetypal folk tale roles of the *hero* and the *donor* respectively.

Secondly, the first chapter will analyse and discuss the ways in which the roles performed by the central human and animal characters in the three texts are not limited to Propp's theories. It will identify the ways in which the human and animal characters in the modern literary fairy tales subvert or reinvent folk tale conventions by swapping, changing or sharing the roles and functions they perform.

The second chapter of the exegesis will identify and discuss the types of transformation the human and animal characters in the modern literary fairy tales experience. It will include a comparative analysis of the types of physical and psychological transformation the human and animal characters undergo as a result of their interaction with each another.

English academic and fairy tale historian, Jack Zipes argues that characters in fairy tales undergo "miraculous transformation" and experience "a change in social status". The second chapter will identify and discuss the ways in which the experiences of the human and animal characters in the three texts adhere to Zipes' theories. It will also consider how human and animal transformation in the three texts differs from Zipes' fairy tale conventions.

The final chapter of the exegesis will analyse and discuss the multi-dimensional nature of the bonds formed between the central human and animal characters. It will include a comparative analysis of the physical, psychological and sexual bonds the humans and animals form. The chapter will demonstrate how relationships between the

human and animal characters in the three texts are physically and emotionally intense, and how the human and animal characters establish and develop sophisticated, meaningful and enduring relationships.

The multi-dimensional nature of the bonds formed between the human and animal characters in the three modern fairy tales will then be discussed in the context of broader theories relating to human animal relationships. Specifically, the human animal relationships in the three texts will be compared to the theories around human and animal interaction developed by English animal behaviour scientist, Rupert Sheldrake, American novelists Sarah Ellis and Will Self, and American academic, Mary Allen.

Overall, the exegesis aims to illustrate the unique characteristics of the central human animal relationships in the three modern literary fairy tales. It aims to demonstrate that, while the relationships are complex, diverse and multi-faceted, they are also similar in nature. The human animal relationships are at the core of each of the tales, and interaction between the human and animal characters is a major driving force of each text. It also aims to illustrate how relationships between humans and animals are often used to explore the boundaries and possibilities of bonds between humans and animals, and how writers of modern literary fairy tales use interaction between human and animal characters as a device to explore the internal world of human characters.

## DEFINITIONS

To identify and discuss the nature of human animal relationships in the modern literary fairy tales, it is firstly necessary to define the genre, and identify how the three chosen texts can be considered as exponents of it. However, attempting a succinct definition of modern literary fairy tales is challenging.

### **Literary Fairy Tales and Oral Folk Tales**

Zipes has written extensively about the literary fairy tale and the difficulty of arriving at a concise definition in 'Towards a Definition of the Literary Fairy Tale', his introduction to 'The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales' (2002). He writes:

"There is no such thing as the fairy tale ... fairy tales have been defined in so many different ways that it boggles the mind to think that they can be categorised as a genre." (Zipes: xv)

Part of the problem, Zipes claims, is confusion surrounding the differences and similarities between oral folk tales and literary fairy tales. He argues, "most literary critics continually confound the oral folk tale with the literary fairy tale and vice versa".

To distinguish the genres, Zipes relies on German scholar Jens Tismar's analysis of the literary fairy tale. Tismar set down two principles for a definition of the literary fairy tales as a genre:

“(1) it distinguishes itself from the oral folk tale in so far as it is written by a single identifiable author; (2) it is thus synthetic, artificial, and elaborate in comparison to the indigenous formation of the folk tale that emanates from communities and tends to be simple and anonymous.” (Zipes: xvi)

Zipes himself describes how the literary fairy tale evolved from oral folk tale traditions. He argues that it gradually became necessary in the modern world to adapt oral storytelling to standards of literacy, and make it acceptable for diffusion in the public sphere. Zipes states: “The fairy tale is [a] literary appropriation of the oral folk tale”

While Zipes establishes the literary fairy tale as a distinct genre he is mindful of the evolutionary, thematic and structural links they share with oral folk tales. He offers a comparative analysis of the structure and themes of oral folk tales and literary fairy tales to illustrate his point. Firstly consider his summary of the traditional oral folk tale:

“Most plots follow a basic pattern. The protagonist will have encounters with mysterious individuals or creatures that give the protagonist gifts. The gifts are often magical agents, which bring about miraculous change. The protagonist makes use of endowed gifts to achieve his or her goal. The success of the protagonist usually leads to marriage and wealth.” (Zipes: xvi)

Now consider Zipes’ summary of the structure of literary fairy tales written by the Brothers Grimm between 1812 and 1857, which includes fairy tales such as Snow

White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Little Red Riding Hood.

“Their tales are constructed rationally to demonstrate the virtues of an opportunistic protagonist who learns to take advantage of gifts and magic powers to succeed in life, which means marriage to a rich person and wealth. [The tales have] a traditional pattern where a ‘good’ young man or woman finds some magical means to help him or herself against sinister forces. In the end the ‘goodness’ of the hero or heroine shines through.” (Zipes: xxvi)

This direct comparison illustrates the common structural and thematic links between oral folk tales and literary fairy tales. Both forms have a similar narrative pattern – a ‘good person’ encounters another person or animal who offers a gift, which is used by the ‘good person’ to better his or her situation.

Thematically, Zipes highlights another similarity between the oral folk tale and the literary fairy tale:

“If there is one ‘constant’ in the structure and theme of the oral folk tale that has passed on to the literary fairy tale, it is transformation – to be sure, miraculous transformation.” (Zipes: xvii)

Zipes argues that miraculous transformation, or the creation of wondrous change through fortuitous happenings, is at the core of both oral folk tales and literary fairy tales. Miraculous transformation, he argues, often involves “supernatural occurrences”, “unexpected magical opportunities and encounters” and “marvellous objects or



phenomenon”.

Additionally, Zipes argues, “everybody and everything can be transformed in a tale,” and he highlights yet another distinct trend that appears in both oral folk tales and literary fairy tales: “In particular there is generally a change in the social status of the protagonist”.

Therefore, for the purpose of this exegesis, literary fairy tales can be defined in the following way; they are a distinct genre, in that they are literary appropriations of the oral folk tale written by a single identifiable author, yet they share strong evolutionary links, and (at times identical) thematic and structural elements with the oral folk tale. In particular, literary fairy tales involve miraculous transformation, which takes the form of wondrous, magical, or supernatural events, and usually result in a change in the social status of the protagonist.

### **Modern Literary Fairy Tales**

While Zipes argues that the literary fairy tale owes much of its themes and structure to the oral folk tale, he also argues that there are two characteristics particular to modern, or contemporary, literary fairy tales.

Firstly, he argues that modern literary fairy tales, written for adults, have a distinct form in comparison to the oral folk tale:

“Fairy tales for adults often [take] the form of a novella or a novel and, though the authors rely on the formulaic form of the classical fairy tale, they often experiment and vary the form in highly original and innovative ways.” (Zipes:

Secondly, he highlights a trend for writers of modern literary fairy tales to use the protagonist as a tool for illuminating injustice and alienation in society:

“The fairy tales of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries tend to pit the individual against society or to use the protagonist in a way to mirror the foibles and contradictions of society.” (Zipes: ox)

The three texts to be analysed and discussed in this exegesis adhere to Zipes’ theories. Firstly, they share the structural and thematic principles of literary fairy tales. Each novel has the narrative structure of a fairy tale – a ‘good person’ encounters an animal that offers a gift, which is used by the ‘good person’ to better his or her situation.

Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*, published in 2002, is the tale of Pi Patel, a 16-year-old Indian boy who is stranded at sea on a lifeboat with a 450-pound adult Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. Pi is the ‘good person’ and the tiger, Richard Parker, is the animal that offers him ‘gifts’. The tiger provides Pi with companionship, restores the boy’s will to live and empowers him psychologically to survive the ordeal of being lost at sea for 227 days.

Peter Heg’s *Woman and the Ape*, published in 1996, is the tale of Madelene Burden, the alcoholic wife of a London zoologist, who flees the human world with her husband’s latest scientific project, an adult male ape called Erasmus. Madelene is the ‘good person’ and Erasmus the ape is the animal who offers her a ‘gift’. Erasmus, imprisoned in a cage, mirrors Madelene’s social entrapment and inspires her to seek

freedom from addiction and an unhappy marriage.

My writing project, *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, is the story of Goldie Sullivan, an elderly former milk bar proprietor and alcoholic recluse who rescues and rehabilitates an injured gander after it has been struck by lightning. In this case Goldie is the 'good person' who is offered 'gifts' by the animal, the gander. The gander stimulates Goldie's maternal instincts and conjures memories of the death of her son and the disappearance of her lover, losses she has not previously been able to reconcile. The bird's presence in her home, and in the township of Baxters Creek, leads Goldie to acceptance in a small community from which she has previously been ostracized.

Secondly, the three texts adhere to Zipes' theories relating to modern literary fairy tales; the texts are all novels that use the protagonist as a tool for illuminating injustice and alienation in society.

The protagonists in *Life of Pi*, *Woman and the Ape* and *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, are all isolated or alienated from society, although in vastly different ways. Pi Patel is the sole human survivor of a sunken ship who endures 227 days lost at sea in a small lifeboat; Madelene Burden is removed from human society firstly through her alcoholism and secondly through her relationship with Erasmus the ape; and Goldie Sullivan lives in exile from the surrounding small community, hiding out the back of the town's former milk bar.

## CHAPTER ONE – ROLES AND FUNCTIONS

In this chapter I will analyse and discuss the roles and functions performed by the central human and animal characters in the modern literary fairy tales. The chapter will identify the extent to which the human and animal characters perform similar roles and functions to their counterparts in traditional oral folk tales as outlined by Propp.

Specifically, the chapter seeks to answer the following questions: Do the human and animal characters perform Propp's archetypal roles of the *hero* and *donor*? Are the roles the human and animal characters perform in the modern literary fairy tales limited to Propp's theories, or do they subvert or reinvent established folk tale character role conventions?

### 1.1. Human Heroes and Animal Donors

Before conducting an analysis of the roles and functions the human and animal characters perform in the three modern literary fairy tales, it is necessary to have an understanding of Propp's theories.

In *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, his analysis of 600 traditional Russian oral folk tales, Propp identifies seven archetypal characters or character roles, and 31 basic narrative functions he argues constitute the formation of a tale. He argues the seven archetypal characters, which include the hero, the donor, the villain and the princess, have set narrative functions, or individual actions, they must perform in order to advance the tale.

Analysis of Propp's 7 archetypal character roles and 31 narrative functions

reveals two distinct conventions relating to human and animal characters. Firstly, Propp argues the central human character in any given tale usually performs the archetypal role of the hero, and secondly, animal characters fulfil supporting roles, often the role of the donor.

According to Propp, the human hero has three narrative functions; the hero must depart on a search or journey, react to the actions or tests of the donor, and at the conclusion of the tale, the hero must wed. The animal donor has two narrative functions; firstly, the donor prepares the hero for the receipt of assistance by testing, interrogating, attacking or challenging the hero; and secondly the donor provides or grants the hero with assistance.

By the human and animal characters fulfilling the roles and functions of Propp's hero and donor, the nature of their relationships is rigidly defined and their interaction follows a distinct narrative pattern. Propp argues the human hero and the animal donor have clearly prescribed actions that must be performed to ensure the evolution or continuation of the narrative. He argues that the human hero encounters the animal donor at the outset of a journey to obtain an object of desire or reconcile an injustice, and that it is the donor's primary function to present the hero with a series of physical and/or psychological tests. Once the hero has overcome, mastered or defeated these tests, the donor grants assistance, often through the provision of some magical skill, knowledge or object, which empowers the hero to continue on his or her journey. The donor often accompanies the hero throughout the remainder of the journey, offering its services as a guide and/or companion.

The strict structure of the interaction between the hero and the donor identified by Propp tells us a great deal about the nature of relationships between human and

animal characters fulfilling these roles. Propp's theories argue that an important, necessary and powerful bond exists between the human hero and the animal donor. The animal donor enters the narrative as a catalyst of change. Its appearance and subsequent testing of the human hero triggers transformation in the human hero, and the eventual granting of assistance further nurtures the evolution of the human hero. The hero is dependant on the donor for receipt of the knowledge, skill or magical power required to continue on his or her journey. The encounter and interaction between the hero and the donor is therefore fundamental to the hero's success.

The resulting relationship is almost symbiotic. The hero and the donor are co-dependent. They rely on one another to fulfil their respective narrative functions. Without the hero, the donor has no function, and without the donor the hero would cease to function or advance further in the narrative. Yet, while the relationship between the hero and donor is crucial, it does not overshadow the hero's journey. Rather, it is necessary interaction on the path to the hero fulfilling his or her ultimate function - the receipt of some desired object or the reversal of misfortune. So, while the donor is a powerful force, it is not equal to the hero. The donor services the role to the hero. The donor's purpose is to incite, inspire or induce the foundations of change in the hero, so the hero is better prepared for the adventure that lies ahead.

## **1.2. Playing by the Rules**

To a large extent the central human and animal characters in the three modern literary fairy tales perform the archetypal roles and associated functions of the hero and the donor, as specified by Propp. Analysis of the three texts reveals that the animal

characters subject the human protagonist to a series of tests or challenges, and that once the human characters have overcome or passed these tests, the animal characters grant assistance.

### *Initial Tests/Reaction of the Hero*

The central animal character in each of the chosen texts performs the first function of Propp's donor, by issuing an initial test or challenge to the central human character. The central human characters then perform the second function of Propp's hero by reacting, either by overcoming or succumbing, to the donor's initial, and ongoing tests.

In the three novels, the arrival of the central animal character in the narrative is the pronouncement of the animal donor's initial test. In each novel the animal donor places its life at the human hero's mercy exactly as specified by Propp:

"A helpless situation simply occurs without any pronouncement of a request."  
(Propp: 41-2)

In *Life of Pi*, Richard Parker's arrival in the narrative issues the first test to the hero, Pi. The tiger appears in a helpless situation, in the ocean drowning, appealing to Pi for mercy. The test, issued by Richard Parker, is this: Pi, the hero, has to decide whether he will rescue the tiger. This is not an easy decision for Pi to make as rescuing Richard Parker means having the share a lifeboat with a tiger.

In *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, the arrival of the gander is also the

pronouncement of an initial request to the heroine, Goldie. Here the helpless situation occurs when the bird is struck down in the middle of migration by a bolt of lightening connecting with a church bell tower in a severe thunderstorm. Goldie, who is midway through performing a ritual over a grave in the nearby cemetery, unwittingly bears witness to the incident. When she goes to inspect the damage caused by the lightening, she stumbles across the injured bird on the ground. The bird's first test for Goldie is a non-verbal request for mercy. Goldie, like Pi, has to decide whether she will rescue the animal.

In *Woman and the Ape*, Erasmus also enters the narrative in a similar helpless situation. Recaptured after initially escaping authorities, the ape arrives at the Burden mansion injured, sedated and stretched out on a hospital trolley. Erasmus' appearance issues Madelene with a non-verbal request for mercy. While Madelene does not have to decide immediately if she will rescue the ape (unlike Pi and Goldie), she does strike up a "secret dialogue" with it, indicating a willingness to assist Erasmus' plight in the future.

### *Ongoing Tests*

Once they have issued an initial test or challenge (and once the human hero has reacted to this test) each of the central animal characters in the three novels presents an ongoing series of varied physical and psychological challenges and tests to the hero.

In *Life of Pi*, after Pi is instrumental in saving Richard Parker's life, the tiger's ongoing presence issues a series of unspoken tests or challenges, which Pi must overcome before being granted assistance. Each of the tests requires Pi to work out how to survive, both physically and psychologically, sharing a lifeboat with an adult male



Bengal tiger. Pi has to secure himself a position on the boat without incurring the wrath of the tiger, he has to retrieve water and food without attracting the tiger's attention, and must comprehend and learn to accept the presence of the tiger on the lifeboat. In addition to the daily physical threat the tiger presents to Pi's safety on the lifeboat, Richard Parker also presents an ongoing psychological challenge, which Pi must overcome if he is to continue on the hero's journey. Pi must comprehend and accept the presence of the tiger.

In *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, the gander also presents a series of direct and indirect physical and psychological tests for the heroine, Goldie. The gander presents Goldie with a set of challenges, which require her to integrate the bird into her home and her lifestyle. After establishing intimacy and trust, the bird begins to follow Goldie's every move around the house. Goldie's reclusive habits are challenged to the point that she can't even go to the toilet in private.

The gander also challenges Goldie's ability to remain living in seclusion. Its continuing presence at her home arouses suspicion in the surrounding community and draws attention to her. Other characters in the novel hear strange noises coming from Goldie's house out the back of the milk bar and there are partial sightings of Goldie interacting in her backyard with an unidentified guest. Also, when the gander demands to venture outside the confines of Goldie's home and yard, it is challenging Goldie to overcome the boundaries she has put around her life.

In *Woman and the Ape*, Erasmus presents the heroine, Madelene Burden, with a number of personal challenges after their first encounter. When Erasmus and Madelene meet on subsequent occasions in the confines a cage in the Burden mansion, the ape scrutinises Madelene's alcohol consumption, and challenges her to question and seek

answers to his origins and identity. By offering Madelene glimpses of his unique anatomy and advanced awareness, Erasmus challenges Madelene to sober up, to critically review and assess her life, her husband's intentions for the ape and what the future holds for all of them.

The ongoing tests or challenges issued by the animal characters in each of the texts are initially unwelcome by the hero, but by the human characters' confronting and overcoming them, they pave the way for the animal donor to grant assistance.

### *Granting Assistance*

After testing or challenging the human protagonist, the central animal character in each of the three novels proceeds to fulfil the second function of Propp's donor. The animal characters grant, transmit or provide a helper to the hero. In each case, the animal donor grants assistance by either directly or indirectly offering itself as a helper.

In overcoming the multitude of tests issued by Richard Parker, Pi, the hero in *Life of Pi* is prepared for the receipt of assistance. The cumulative effect of the tiger's presence is that Richard Parker grants Pi the courage, companionship and insight to survive his ordeal lost at sea. The tiger empowers Pi with the skills he needs to succeed on his quest. It is Richard Parker's presence that leads Pi to formulate a survival plan and Richard Parker grants assistance to Pi by offering himself as the helper. Pi determines that the best way to survive his time at sea is to train Richard Parker as if he were a circus animal. Pi decides to create: "THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH...THE PI PATEL, INDO-CANADIAN, TRANS-PACIFIC, FLOATING CIRCUS...". By establishing a circus trainer/circus animal relationship with Richard Parker, Pi discovers

a way to discipline or control the tiger, and is able to successfully mark out parameters for them to share the lifeboat.

In *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, the gander performs the second function of the donor by granting the hero, Goldie, assistance. The bird acts as a conduit to the past, leading Goldie to resolve her grief and overcome her alienation from society. Repeatedly throughout the novel, the gander transports Goldie to the past events, facilitating the reconciliation of unresolved mistakes and losses. By confronting her with a reminder of her past, the gander triggers in Goldie a series of verbal recollections. Goldie communicates her past to the bird and it acts as a witness and confidant. In a sense, the bird performs the role of a non-verbal therapist, listening to and prompting Goldie's recollections. The bird allows Goldie to face and put to rest her past in a way she has not previously been able to do in the company of another living creature.

In *Woman and the Ape*, Erasmus the ape grants assistance by offering himself as Madelene's helper. He flees London with Madelene in his arms, physically transporting her from the imprisonment of her alcoholism and marriage, to the freedom of a wildlife sanctuary on the fringes of human society. The ape's actions grant Madelene a way toward freedom from alcohol and her husband.

In all three novels the central animal characters fulfil the second function of Propp's donor. The animals grant assistance to their human hero by offering themselves as helpers. They inspire, inform, motivate and guide the humans on their respective quests.

### 1.3. Reinventing Conventions

While there is much evidence to suggest the human and animal characters in the three modern fairy tales perform the roles and functions of Propp's hero and donor, there is also ample evidence to suggest that the roles performed by the characters are not limited to Propp's theories. In diverse ways the roles performed by the central human and animal characters in the three chosen modern fairy tales differ from those performed by humans and animals in traditional folk tales.

Analysis of the texts suggests writers of modern fairy tales experiment with the conventional roles humans and animals perform, as outlined by Zipes. While they rely on the "formulaic form of the classical fairy tale", they often experiment and vary the roles and functions the characters perform in highly original and innovative ways.

In the three chosen modern fairy tales the central human and animal characters subvert or transcend fairy tale and folk tale conventions by swapping, changing or sharing the roles and functions they perform. The roles of the hero and the donor are sometimes fluid, and sometimes the lines defining the roles are blurred, or expanded upon.

#### *Swapping Roles*

In *The Woman and the Ape*, Madelene Burden and Erasmus the ape swap roles. In the second half of the novel, after Erasmus, as the animal donor, has empowered Madelene to leave her drunken haze and unsatisfactory marriage, and the pair escape the city of London, a reversal of roles takes place. Erasmus, the animal donor, assumes

the role of the hero of the narrative, and the human heroine, Madelene becomes his human donor.

In exile in an animal sanctuary, at “St Francis Forest, London Zoo’s private wildlife reserve”, Madelene relinquishes, or perhaps completes, the role of the hero. Sober and free from the confines of her marriage to Adam Burden, Madelene has achieved the goals, or remedied the personal injustices, she set out to achieve. She has found freedom from alcohol, from her marriage and the constraints of human society. Her heroine’s journey has come to an end.

At this point, if following traditional fairy tale conventions, Heg could have ended the narrative with Madelene fulfilling the hero’s third and final function, effectively wedded to the ape and having attained her desired goals with the ape as her donor. However, Heg pushes the narrative further.

Firstly, Madelene confesses to the ape that she no longer has a clear direction of their adventure in mind. She asks, “So, what’s going to happen to us? ... Where is all this leading?”.

Secondly, Erasmus takes up the mantle of the hero. He reveals himself to be a representative of a unique species of ape with an advanced form of intelligence, who has come to London with the purpose of delivering a message to the human race. Erasmus’ goal is to deliver a wake up call to humanity about the destruction of the natural environment and the harm humans inflict on animal species. He provides Madelene with an answer to her question regarding their future direction and outlines his own quest. He tells her, “There’s something I have to do. That’s why I came”.

Earlier actions in the narrative, now viewed in retrospect, allows us to see Erasmus in a new light. The ape fulfilled the first function of the hero when he departed

his home, an “island” jungle. He tells Madelene his departure was a conscious decision, that he “allowed himself to be caught”.

At the same time as Erasmus assumes the role of the hero, Madelene is revealed to have fulfilled the function of the donor. Presenting Erasmus with her alcoholism and lethargy can be viewed as Madelene issuing a series of physical and psychological tests to the ape. Erasmus’ responses lead Madelene to “give up the drink”, and Madelene, in a sober state, is then able to grant the ape assistance. She frees the ape from the cage in her husband’s mansion and becomes the conduit through which Erasmus can address human society. Madelene continues to act as the donor once the pair has fled London by helping Erasmus to expand his vocabulary.

Erasmus fulfils the second function of the hero by reacting to Madelene’s actions as the donor. Armed with speech, and dressed as a man, he leads them both to a confrontation with a congregation of leaders of human society at the opening of the New London Regent’s Park Zoological Garden. There, Erasmus reveals he, and eleven others from his species, have been living amongst humans hoping to bring about a change in the way humans treat animals.

Erasmus also fulfils the third and final function of Propp’s hero. After revealing the existence of his species, he sails off into the sunset, returning to his island jungle home, with Madelene, his “princess” bride, expecting his child.

Heg subverts Propp’s traditional fairy tale conventions by allowing the central characters to exchange roles, and by elevating the animal character to the role of the hero. By swapping roles, both the central human and animal characters are empowered to attain their desired outcome, and aid the other in doing the same. However, it is not convention in Propp’s theories for the role of the donor and the hero to be exchanged.

### *Blurring the Lines*

In *Life of Pi*, the roles of the hero and the donor are blurred. Late in the novel, the human hero Pi presents an alternative explanation of his survival. He suggests that Richard Parker is a projection of himself, a mechanism for coping with his ordeal, lost at sea for 227 days. The suggestion forces the reader to consider the possibility that Pi alone fulfils the role of the human hero and the animal donor.

After safely reaching Mexico and parting company with Richard Parker, who disappears into the jungle without trace, Pi is interviewed by two representatives from the Maritime Department in the Japanese Ministry of Transport. The representatives seek information about the sinking of the *Tsimtsumi* and Pi's survival. Pi tells them the story of having to learn to share a lifeboat with Richard Parker, the story already read by the reader.

Upon hearing the tale the Japanese Ministry of Transport officers declare they do not believe it. One of the officers states, "Mr Patel, a tiger is an incredibly dangerous wild animal. How could you survive in a lifeboat with one?". The officers tell Pi that they "want a story without animals that will explain the sinking of the *Tsimtsumi*." And Pi gives them one. This time he tells them he conjured the tiger, Richard Parker, as a way of comprehending his experiences at sea, that in the absence of another living creature, he invented the tiger to test his own courage, to assist him in regaining the will to live, and to offer him companionship. Pi suggests to the officers that his survival is due, in part, to having manifested an ordeal – having to learn to survive at sea with a "wet, trembling, half-drowned, heaving and coughing three-year-old adult Bengal tiger" –

greater than the real one of being stranded at sea alone.

The deep psychological connection between Pi and Richard Parker, as an extension of Pi, is lost on the two officers. However, unlike the Japanese officers, we can make sense of the duality. Rather than simply fulfilling the conventional role of the human hero, Pi effectively performs both the role of the hero and the donor. In the absence of an actual or real donor, Pi has generated one. The human hero and the animal donor are integrated into the one character.

While Pi and Richard Parker fulfil the conventional roles and functions of the hero and the donor respectively throughout the majority of the novel, Martel transcends Propp's character role conventions by suggesting the relationship between the boy and the tiger is purely psychological.

When the officers depart, they joke with Pi about encountering Richard Parker, and Pi's response further suggests the tiger is lurking somewhere deep within his psyche. He tells them Richard Parker is, "hiding somewhere you'll never find him".

Much earlier in the novel, comments made by Pi, viewed in retrospect, add further weight to the argument that the boy and the tiger are one in the same. Pi tells the reader at the beginning of the narrative, "Richard Parker has stayed with me".

Human characters performing both the role of the hero and the donor is not a convention Propp includes in his theories. In folk tale convention, the donor is external to the hero. The donor is a role performed by a separate character, be it human or animal or any other animated object. Propp gives no examples of a melding together of the roles of the hero and the donor. This is a unique feature of the modern literary fairy tale.

### *Enhanced Roles*



In my novel, *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, the functions or actions performed by the donor are also not limited to Propp's theories. The role of the donor, performed by the gander, is enhanced, or expanded upon compared to the traditional conventions of the role. In addition to acting as the donor to the human hero, Goldie Sullivan, the goose also offers its services as the donor to other characters. Though it is often through indirect ways, the goose issues tests or challenges to other characters, and once these have been met or overcome, these other characters are often granted the assistance needed to complete their individual journey in the narrative.

While Propp's theories do not specifically prohibit the donor from interaction with characters other than the hero, rules for, or examples of, the donor's possible relationship with other characters are not spelled out. As Propp defines the donor's primary functions as testing and then granting assistance to the hero, it is reasonable to conclude that Propp might consider relations with other characters as secondary.

However, regardless of what Propp's view might be, the role of the donor in my novel is amplified or expanded upon. Not only does the goose act as the donor, testing and assisting the hero, it also triggers and nurtures transformation in the lives of minor characters in the novel.

There are two main ways the goose acts as a donor to the minor characters. Firstly, and indirectly, the arrival of the goose creates suspicion and anxiety in the surrounding community. Before its existence in the town is fully revealed a number of minor characters speculate about the arrival of a new, unsettling or simply unknown, presence. While Goldie, as the hero, encounters the bird directly and is forced to react to its arrival, other characters, who do not initially come into direct contact with the bird,

are forced to react to its arrival. Their speculation of a new 'unknown' presence in the town is a response to the goose having issued an indirect test. The arrival of the goose has a ripple effect on the minor characters that populate Baxters Creek. Motivated to speculate about the new 'unknown' some of the minor characters are led to ask questions and to seek answers about circumstances in their own lives. In some cases the presence of the goose conjures a desire in minor characters to confront or uncover more about their own lives.

One example of the how the bird indirectly challenges or tests minor characters in the novel, is the speculation the bird's arrival generates in town's shire maintenance worker, Travis Handley. Travis has his suspicions aroused of a new presence in the town when, sorting through the remains of St Agathas church after it has burnt to the ground, he discovers traces of blood on the church's bell tower (which the goose collided with during the storm that lead to the church being destroyed) and his dog, Betty, finds a clump of blood-stained golden feathers in the churchyard.

The discovery of blood and feathers at the site of the church blaze awakens fear and uncertainty, as well as a level of curiosity in Travis (and to a certain extend in his canine companion Betty). The discoveries present a puzzle. Where did the blood and feathers come from? Whom or what do they belong to? What role do they play in the destruction of the church?

Travis reacts to this challenge or test, issued by the goose as the donor, by taking his findings to close family friend, Mary Peddley, whom he hopes will be able to shed some light on the mystery. This in turn results in Mary's suspicions being aroused, and Mary is herself indirectly challenged or tested by the goose.

Troubled by the discovery of the feathers and the blood, both Travis and Mary

are prompted to uncover or reconcile other mysteries or concealed truths in their own lives. Mary takes a crucifix she found on her husband's grave to Jack Diamond, the local publican and her former lover, and the sharing of the mystery leads them to rekindle their romance. With the origins of the feathers having awakened his curiosity, Travis is led to consider new dimensions in his relationship with the town's newspaper reporter, Kevin Dwyer.

The goose also performs the role of the donor for minor characters in direct ways. Once the existence of the goose is fully revealed to the wider community outside Goldie's milk bar, the bird presents a number of physical and psychological tests to various minor characters.

Most notably the presence of the goose directly and physically challenges the authority of Baxters Creek shire president, Alexander Bourke and president of the Purposeful Widows Brigade, Pat Thompson. Both characters have a strong desire to see Goldie Sullivan remain an outsider in the town. Alexander hopes to force Goldie's eviction from the milk bar when he acquires the premises for his township redevelopment plans, and Pat, the mother of Daniel Thompson, whom Goldie seduced when he was a teenager, does not wish to see the woman, who she blames for her son deserting the town, rejoin the community.

When Pat encounters the goose face to face for the first time, she feels physically challenged by the presence of the bird and she reacts by attacking it. After her violent reaction to the bird, Pat enlists the support of the town's elected head, Alexander Bourke. As a result, Alexander is led to a direct confrontation with the goose as it swims with Goldie in the creek running through the heart of the town.

The fully visible, physical presence of the bird issues a direct challenge to Pat and

Alexander. Its presence is a challenge to their ability to maintain authority over, or control of, circumstances in their own lives. The bird's ongoing presence in the town, which inspires Goldie to reopen her milk bar and rejoin society, ultimately brings about the unravelling of Alexander's redevelopment plans and forces Pat to confront the loss of her son.

Nowhere in his theories does Propp argue that the donor can test or challenge, and grant assistance to, characters other than the hero. Propp argues that the donor's functions are to be performed by the donor in conjunction with the hero. Therefore, using the goose to perform the functions of the donor with, or for, characters other than the hero is outside of fairy tale convention.

One of the effects of empowering the goose to perform the functions of the donor in its relations with the minor characters is that the role of the donor is enhanced, or amplified. The goose performs the functions of the donor multiple times, triggering and nurturing transformation in the lives of many characters, not just the hero.

### **Chapter One Conclusion**

Analysis of the texts reveals that, while they do perform the roles and functions of Propp's hero and donor, the human and animal characters also subvert or reinvent established character role conventions.

In each of the three novels there is compelling evidence of writers experimenting with the conventional roles of the hero and the donor, and reinventing how human and animal characters perform them. While there are distinct differences between the novels, all three involve manipulation of the ways in which the roles of the hero and the donor

are performed. Whether the roles are exchanged, blended or amplified, they subvert or transcend fairy tale and folk tale conventions. This echoes Zipes' theory that modern literary fairy tales experiment with the "formulaic form of the classic fairy tale".

As a result, the nature of relationships between human and animal characters in modern fairy tales is somewhat different to that of their relative counterparts in conventional folk tales or traditional fairy tales. The blurring, swapping or enhancement of the hero and donor roles serves to dissolve the barriers between the human and animal characters. While Propp argues that the relationship between the hero and the donor is an intimate one, there are distinct divisions between human heroes and animal donors in traditional fairy tales. According to Propp, animals are generally relegated to the role of the donor, the role of the hero and the donor are not performed by one character, the hero and the donor are not interchangeable roles, and the donor generally services the hero exclusively. Therefore subverting or rejecting these conventions - by allowing an animal to be the hero, having one character perform dual roles of both the hero and the donor, or allowing the donor to perform its functions in relationships with characters in addition to the hero - brings about greater intimacy between the human and the animal characters. In *Woman and the Ape*, Madelene and Erasmus develop a highly sophisticated (and sexually charged) interspecies bond. In *Life of Pi*, Pi and Richard Parker's relationship exists as a deeply embedded psychological union, and in *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, the bird is a powerful influence not only in the life of the hero, Goldie Sullivan, but in the lives of many of the minor characters in the tale.

## **CHAPTER TWO - TRANSFORMATIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

In this chapter I will identify and discuss the types of transformation experienced by the human and animal characters in the modern literary fairy tales. The chapter will firstly include a comparative analysis of the physical and psychological transformation the animal characters undergo as a result of their interaction with the human characters. Secondly, the chapter will analyse and compare the types of transformation the central human characters experience as a result of their relationships with the central animal characters.

The chapter seeks to answer the following questions: to what extent do the human and animal characters experience “miraculous transformation” as outlined by Zipes? Do the human and animal characters experience wondrous, magical or supernatural transformation? Is this transformation external and/or internal change? Do the characters experience a change in social status, and is this change positive and beneficial, as Zipes suggests?

### **2.1. Animal Transformation**

The central animal characters in the three modern literary fairy tales experience moments of miraculous transformation during the course of their relationships with the central human characters. The animals undergo wondrous, magical and supernatural physical and psychological transformation. They reveal possession of human consciousness, or an advanced form of awareness, that stretches beyond the realms of what is usually considered to be reality. To varying degrees, the animal characters also

adopt human appearance or identity.

### *Animals Imbued with Human Consciousness*

The animal characters in the three modern literary fairy tales are magically imbued with human consciousness, or display heightened cognitive abilities. They demonstrate the acquisition of advanced levels of awareness both verbally and non-verbally.

In two of the novels, the central animal characters acquire the ability of human speech and the skills to communicate using the English language.

In *Woman and the Ape*, Erasmus suddenly develops the ability to speak. After Madelene and Erasmus have escaped the Burden mansion and are cornered by police, Erasmus reveals he can talk. Just as they are about to be recaptured, the ape takes Madelene in his arms and says, "Let's go".

For Madelene, Erasmus' supernatural ability to speak is dizzying and difficult to comprehend. The development of the ape's communication skills stretches beyond her usual understanding of reality. Heg illustrates the point:

"The feeling of all rules being waived went to Madelene's head like an injection of alcohol and she took a step backwards." (Heg: 135)

In *Life of Pi*, Richard Parker also unexpectedly acquires the ability to communicate verbally. As Pi and Richard Parker lie on the lifeboat close to death, Pi, who has lost his sight, hears someone speaking to him. Pi engages in conversation with

the speaker though he is unsure of the origins of the voice. He concludes, "I had gone mad", and that the voice must be an "effect of wind and waves". However, after further discussion with the speaker, Pi realises it is Richard Parker who has acquired the ability to speak:

"I knew it. I wasn't hearing voices. I hadn't gone mad. It was Richard Parker who was speaking to me." (Martel: 246)

In *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, the gander reveals the transformation, or expansion of its consciousness through non-verbal ways. The bird develops a heightened consciousness through its interaction with Goldie. It develops an awareness of, or at least becomes sensitive to, Goldie's emotional status and her inability to reconcile past events. This is illustrated many times in the second half of the novel, but a good example occurs when the goose presents Goldie with a photograph of her as a young woman, standing out the front of the milk bar when it was open for business. The bird marches into Goldie's kitchen with the photograph in its beak and confronts her with it. When Goldie refuses to look at it, the bird prods her and taps the photo with its beak. The goose not only develops a curiosity about Goldie's past, but also a determination to make sense of it.

### *Animals Adopt Human Appearance*

In some cases the physical appearance of animal characters is also wondrously transformed. The animal characters adopt or assume human appearance or human



identity through the use of trickery, costume and disguise, or through supernatural acquisition of human physicality.

In *Woman and the Ape*, Erasmus gradually reveals himself to be a unique species of ape - a more human kind of ape. When Madelene inspects Erasmus at close range in the cage inside the Burden mansion, she discovers the ape is more “humanoid” than first thought.

The ape’s physical appearance is also transformed through the use of trickery and disguise. When they flee the Burden mansion, Madelene dresses Erasmus in human clothing to evade detection from authorities. Erasmus “enters the world of man ... kitted out in a pair of flip-flops, the baggy trousers from a karate suit, a tee-shirt ripped at the sleeves...sunglasses and a felt hat with slits cut in its brim and crown”.

In *The Goose at Goldie’s Milk Bar*, the central animal character, the gander, takes on the appearance of a human infant. Goldie dresses the bird in nappies as a way of dealing with the bird’s messy toilet habits in her house. From this point on other characters in the novel misinterpret the bird’s appearance. The wife of the local real estate agent, Teresa Burke, spies the bird rummaging through Goldie’s yard and mistakes the animal for an infant human male.

“Suddenly a toddler, a small boy Teresa thought, with a long nose and a head of downy golden hair, wearing nothing but a nappy, stepped into a clearing in the yard.”

Later, when Goldie and the gander emerge from their seclusion living in the house out the back of the milk bar and visit the local news agents, the proprietor, Mabel

Simpson, also misinterprets the bird as a human child. She asks, "How old is the little one?" and Goldie answers, "Just a baby,"

## **2.2. Human Transformation**

While the animal characters experience moments of magical or wondrous physical and cognitive transformation, the nature of human transformation is quite different. In the three modern literary fairy tales the central human characters undergo a change in social status and are also engaged in an ongoing process of deeply personal internal change.

### *A Change in Social Status*

To a certain extent, the central human characters in each of the modern literary fairy tales experience transformation as outlined by Zipes. He argues that it is common for the central human character in the literary fairy tale, the protagonist, to undergo "a change in ... social status". He states that the protagonist "generally rises in social status". In particular Zipes argues that the "protagonist ... learns to succeed in life, which means marriage to a rich person and wealth." He argues that the transformation of the protagonist's social status is meant to "serve a liberating purpose" and to "conserve a utopian spirit". The trend is for the transformation of social status to bring about positive changes in the protagonist's circumstances.

To varying degrees, the central human characters in the three modern fairy tales "succeed in life", but not strictly in the conventional sense as Zipes outlines. The human

characters do not enter into conventional marriages or gain financial wealth, rather they attain freedom from, or acceptance and inclusion in, a new society. Each central human character takes up, or is awarded, citizenship in a new world.

In *Woman and the Ape*, the social status of the central human characters, Madelene Burden, is transformed. At the conclusion of the narrative Madelene, who is pregnant with Erasmus' child, departs London with the ape to take up residency in Erasmus' distant jungle home. She is effectively betrothed to Erasmus, and with him she embarks on a new life, and a new role as a mother, in a hybrid human-animal kingdom.

While her union with Erasmus is a kind of marriage, there is no obtaining of financial wealth. Rather than ascending the human social ladder, Madelene abandons her place in human society. Madelene's transformation could be considered as a lessening or downgrading of her social status. She abandons her place in human society, trading her wealth and marriage to Adam Burden for an obscure and uncertain future on the fringes.

However, perhaps Heg is suggesting a different kind of change in social status. He suggests it is possible to lose your status in human society and still succeed in life. Madelene is transformed from a dissatisfied life trapped in the confines of human society and instead finds elevated status as an escapee of human society and as a member of a society of advanced animals. She is transformed from captive to escapee, throwing off the shackles of human society.

Also, Madelene is afforded elevated status in the human society she departs. She gains celebrity status. The night the woman and the ape disappear from London the evening's newspapers and television news are filled with reports with headlines such as "Zoo director's drunken wife steals rare chimpanzee" and "Ape kidnaps woman".

Though this change might not normally be considered desirable, it is a change in social status nonetheless.

Whereas Madelene abandons human society, the central human characters in *Life of Pi* and *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar* seek to rejoin it. In both novels the central human characters are exiled from usual human society throughout the duration of their respective narratives, and it is through interaction with an animal character that they are able to return to or rejoin human civilisation.

In *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, Goldie Sullivan's social status undergoes transformation through her relationship with the goose, more in keeping with Zipes' theories. She does not marry at the end of the narrative (though in a sense she has been wedded to the goose throughout the novel), but she does assume greater and more positive social status in the surrounding small town community. When she decides to discontinue her reclusive behaviour and reopens the milk bar, she once again becomes a visible and engaged member of the local community. Goldie goes from being an outcast, ostracised and ridiculed for her past behaviour, to finding acceptance. The bird's presence allows her to transcend alienation from, and to take up active participation in, the surrounding community.

Throughout the majority of the novel Goldie fears interaction with the wider human community and prohibits herself and the goose from being seen in public. She confines them both to her house. "We don't go out," Goldie firmly tells the goose one day as it paces back and forth at her back door, wanting to exit. However, after Goldie is inspired by the goose to reopen her milk bar for business, her fear of the wider community and reluctance to be seen in public is replaced by feelings of comfort and optimism.

To a lesser extent, the social status of the human hero in *Life of Pi* is also transformed in line with Zipes' theories. Through his relationship with the tiger, Richard Parker, Pi transcends extreme alienation from human society. Stranded at sea Pi was naked, hungry and "alone with despair". However, after he is rescued, he is included again in human society:

"[T]hose who rescued me ... gave me clothes and food. Doctors and nurses cared for me as if I were a premature baby." (Martel: 286)

After reaching the shores of Mexico at the end of his ordeal lost at sea, Pi becomes a citizen of Canada (rather than returning to his native India), where he completes his education, and obtains employment as an accomplished academic. As an adult he marries and becomes a father.

### *Ongoing Process of Internal Change*

Beyond experiencing transformation of their social status, the central human characters in the three modern literary fairy tales are also engaged in an ongoing process of deeply personal internal change. Analysis of the texts suggests that, while each of the central human characters experiences a change in social status by the conclusion of their respective narratives, this change is usually the end product or result of transformation taking place in other aspects or dimensions of their lives. The central human characters in the three novels undergo deeply personal, often internalised change, and this transformation precedes the transformation of their outward social status.

In varying ways the animal characters in the three novels offer the human characters the insight, companionship, motivation and courage they need to continue, and complete, their respective journeys. Erasmus empowers Madelene with the confidence and motivation she needs to give up drinking and confront her troubled marriage to Adam Burden, in *Woman and the Ape*. In *Life of Pi*, Richard Parker grants Pi the skills he needs to survive his ordeal lost at sea, and in *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, the gander acts as a conduit to the past through which Goldie can find reconciliation and acceptance.

The transformation of the psychology of the human characters in the three modern fairy tales, or the change they experience in the way they view themselves and the world around them, is notably outside the realm of Zipes' theories on the nature of transformation in traditional fairy tales. Zipes argues that transformation of the human hero in fairy tales is marked by a change in social status and he does not discuss other ways or dimensions in which the hero may be transformed. He does not include examples of human heroes being transformed internally. According to Zipes, transformation is external. A human hero acquires assets (a marriage partner and wealth). Zipes does not suggest changes or shifts in the psychology or behaviour of a human hero as markers of transformation.

However, in the three modern literary fairy tales, a much greater emphasis is placed on changes in the psychological and behavioural dimensions of the human characters. In modern literary fairy tales transformation of the central human characters' internal world appears to be a vital precursor to the transformation of social status. Indeed, it is only by wrestling with and overcoming internal disputes, often revolving around questions of identity, that the human hero's external world is transformed.

The human characters in the three modern literary fairy tales experience differing degrees of emotional and psychological transformation prior to acquiring a change in social status.

In *Woman and the Ape*, before experiencing a change in social status, Madelene Burden undergoes a deep seated psychological transformation as a result of her relationship with the ape, Erasmus. Erasmus empowers Madelene with the insight, motivation and conviction she needs to give up drinking and confront her troubled marriage to Adam Burden. As a result of Erasmus' persistent scrutiny, the morning after her second visit to the ape's cage, Madelene "began [the] day by changing her life."

From this point in the narrative, Madelene's transformation, instigated by Erasmus, becomes physically evident. Madelene dresses herself in a disguise, transforming into "Priscilla from the Meat Marketing Board Research Centre", and goes to her husband's office undercover to find out more about the ape. Heg describes the transformation of her appearance.

"She put on a pair of sunglasses. A scarf over her head...a thin duster coat...a pair of battered platform sandals. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her own mother would not have recognised her." (Heg:40)

After being granted access to a veterinary odontologist who answers some of her questions about the ape, Madelene leaves Adam's office and walks the streets of London with "a new sense of inner worth". Motivated by her interaction with the ape, the previously lethargic and superficial Madelene has transformed into a cunning heroine.

The dynamics of Madelene's relationship with her husband, Adam, continue to

change as a result of Madelene's relationship with Erasmus. During their usual dinner conversations, Madelene had previously been, "Like a well-mannered season-ticket holder [who] had long since learned to applaud in all the right places while her attention was somewhere else entirely".

However, the transformation in Madelene, triggered by Erasmus' scrutinising of her lifestyle, begins to impact on the marriage roles. Madelene's husband, Adam, registers this change in his wife. Sitting opposite his wife at the dinner table, "he was trying to catch a glimpse of the individual he had married but seventeen months earlier."

Once Madelene makes the decision to free Erasmus from the cage in her husband's mansion, she realises the full nature of her transformation.

"It felt as though yet another woman had settled herself beside her...Turning towards her Madelene saw that this was Responsibility." (Heg: 69)

Madelene's connection to Erasmus, and the physical and psychological transformation the ape has triggered in her, leads Madelene to accept the ultimate challenge issued by Erasmus - to stop drinking.

Erasmus also brings about another important internal or psychological shift in Madelene. Through her relationship with the ape, Madelene's maternal instincts are awakened. During her marriage to Adam Burden, Madelene has held a dire view of children. Her husband, Adam had "eyed [children] with distaste", and "Madelene had looked at children through [Adam's] eyes".

However, Madelene's view of children is drastically altered after she is united



sexually and emotionally with Erasmus. Erasmus poses a question about the possibility himself and Madelene reproducing:

“[Erasmus] rested the palm of [his] hand on [Madelene’s] abdomen.

“Couldn’t there be a child?” (Heg: 159)

Madelene’s reflection on the subject reveals the extent of the emotional and sexually charged transformation she has undergone. Firstly, she recalls how she and Adam “had cut the switch to the question of children.” Then, she assesses her feelings toward having children with the ape:

“Now, when Erasmus placed his hand on her belly, a dazzling white light was shed on this darkness.” (Heg: 160)

Erasmus leads Madelene to transcend the emotional, sexual and physical isolation she has endured in her marriage. It is a powerful transformation of Madelene’s internal world, which spurs her on to acquire a change in social status later in the narrative.

In *The Goose at Goldie’s Milk Bar*, the change in social status experienced by Goldie Sullivan is also preceded by a transformation of her emotional status. The gander’s presence in Goldie’s life conjures up a connection with her unresolved past. In particular, the bird reminds Goldie of her dead son, Thomas. Goldie mourns the death of her child, and her grief is part of the reason for her reclusive behaviour. The circumstances of his death and its repercussions are the narrative key to Goldie’s

alienation from society. The bird's presence challenges Goldie to remember events and emotions she has been trying to forget. Through her relationship with the goose, Goldie's grief is gradually transformed.

When Goldie discovers the goose in the debris of the church struck by lightning, she immediately associates the bird with a human infant. Goldie then proceeds to treat the bird as if it were a human baby. She takes it back to her home, cradles in her arms, and places the injured bird in a child's cot. Then, when the unconscious bird is struck with a bout of hiccups, Goldie is overwhelmed by a desire to nurture the creature, "to comfort it with kisses and lullabies, and to nurse it off to sleep". Through interaction with the goose, Goldie's repressed maternal instincts are stirred and she is forced to confront the loss of her son. Once she reaches a point where she acknowledges and accepts her son's death, Goldie is able to move forward and embrace a change in her social status.

The cumulative effect of the gander's presence is that Goldie is empowered by the bird to reclaim her status as a citizen of the town. Goldie, with the gander's assistance, reclaims her right to participate in the surrounding community. This is illustrated when Goldie decides to leave the safety and seclusion of her house and confront the other members of the community.

Goldie becomes an active member of society (she takes the gander on a picnic in the park and they go swimming in the creek), and she engages in direct confrontation with the antagonistic forces in the narrative, or the villains of the tale. Goldie is inspired, and perhaps to a certain extent forced, to take a stand against her oppressors as a result of the gander's presence.

In *Life of Pi*, Pi's behaviour and his view of the world are transformed on a

number of levels before he is successful in achieving a change in social status. Psychologically, Pi transforms himself into the tiger. He imitates aspects of Richard Parker's animal behaviour and adopts the tiger's identity as a mechanism for coping with his ordeal at sea.

Pi himself notes how his physical behaviour has been transformed during his time lost at sea with Richard Parker. He says, "I descended to a level of savagery I never imagined possible".

To improve his chances of survival, Pi imitates certain aspects of the tiger's behaviour. He becomes animalistic. He copies Richard Parker's habit of marking out his territory on the lifeboat with urine and vomit.

In addition to adopting the tiger's behavioural traits, Pi also assumes the animal's identity. He suggests to the two representatives from the Maritime Department in the Japanese Ministry of Transport, who come to visit him after he has been rescued, that he himself was the only tiger on the lifeboat, that he was Richard Parker. Lost at sea, Pi transforms himself into Richard Parker, or manifests the presence of the tiger, as a way of comprehending the ordeal he endures. By transforming his physical behaviour and adopting the psychological identity of the tiger, Pi is able to continue and eventually complete his journey and is then rewarded with a change in social status.

## **Chapter Two Conclusion**

In the three modern literary fairy tales, the types of physical and psychological transformation the animal characters experience adhere to Zipes' theory of miraculous transformation. The animal characters are imbued with supernatural human

consciousness, acquire advanced communication skills and assume human appearance, stretching the realms of what would usually be considered reality by the human characters.

However, the nature of human transformation in the texts extends beyond Zipes' theories. While the central human characters experience a change in social status, the change is not strictly an elevation or improvement in martial status and wealth. Rather, the human characters earn or regain citizenship, or acceptance and inclusion, in a new society.

Also, the change in social position experienced by the central human characters is usually the end product of an ongoing process of deeply personal, internal change. It is through interaction with the central animal characters that the human characters' internal worlds are changed. The animal characters help transform the physical behaviour, psychological and emotional status, and sometimes the sexual behaviour of the central human characters. In fact, entering into enduring physical and psychological relationships with animals seems to be key to the central human characters in the modern literary fairy tales attaining a change in social status. It is through undergoing a process of multi-dimensional internal transformation through interaction with the animal characters that the humans are able to accept or be prepared for the transformation of their social status.

Transformation of the psychological, physical and sexual dimensions of the human character is not a convention included in Zipes' theories regarding traditional fairy tales. Thus, transformation of the human characters' internal world through interaction with animals, prior to any change in social status, is a unique feature of the modern literary fairy tale.

Altering the landscape of the internal world of the central human character, through interaction with the central animal character, is also at the core of each of the novels. The three modern literary fairy tales promote the notion that animals are magically or supernaturally imbued with the power or ability to incite change and bring about positive transformation in the lives of humans. In fact, the modern literary fairy tales appear to use animals and their interaction with humans as a tool to manifest ongoing internal change in the human characters.

The three modern literary fairy tales, as novels, offer the space or room for exploration and detailed description of the gradual psychological transformation of human characters. This is a major point of difference between human and animal relationships in modern literary fairy tales and in traditional oral folk tales. Tales written down by a single identifiable author, documented over hundreds of pages (as in the case with each of the modern literary fairy tales), allow room for the embellishment of the internal worlds of characters. Oral folk tales, on the other hand, are tales that have traditionally been passed on verbally and have not been written down, and therefore they have not necessarily offered the same opportunities for detailed description of deep, gradual and ongoing internal and psychological change.

## CHAPTER THREE – MULTI-DIMENSIONAL BONDS

Having identified and discussed the roles and functions the human and animal characters perform, and the types of transformation they undergo, the final chapter of the exegesis will focus on an analysis of the wider physical, psychological and emotional dimensions of the human animal relationships in the three modern literary fairy tales.

The chapter will analyse and discuss in detail the physical intimacy and psychological intensity of the relationships between the human and animal characters, and the extent to which the relationships are sexual in nature.

The chapter will also discuss the bonds formed between the human and animal characters in the three modern fairy tales in the broader context of theories about human animal relationships developed by English animal behavioural scientist, Rupert Sheldrake, American novelists Sarah Ellis and Will Self, and American academic, Mary Allen.

### 3.1. Intimate Physical Relationships

Firstly, in what kinds of environments do the human and animal characters encounter one another, and what is the nature of their physical interaction in these environments?

#### *Enforced Cohabitation in Unusual Habitats*

In each of the novels the characters are placed in situations of enforced

cohabitation and endure close physical proximity to one another in confined environments outside of usual human and animal habitats.

In *Life of Pi*, the central human character, the 16-year-old Indian boy, Pi Patel, is forced to share a small lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean for 227 days with the central animal character, the adult Royal Bengal tiger, Richard Parker. The two characters find themselves stranded alone together on the lifeboat after the cargo ship *Pi*, his family and their zoo animals are sailing on from India to Canada, sinks.

Martel uses the extraordinary setting of the tiny lifeboat to lock his central human and animal characters in a confined space, where they remain for the duration of their relationship. In this unique environment Pi and Richard Parker encounter a physical closeness that humans and untamed zoo animals are usually not afforded or forced to contemplate. There is an extreme and heightened intimacy between the characters, an ongoing physical tension where Pi and Richard Parker are forced to negotiate how to survive sharing a lifeboat with one another.

In *Woman and the Ape*, Madelene Burden and Erasmus the ape are forced to cohabitate in a number of confined spaces outside usual human and animal environments. Firstly, they are both imprisoned in Adam Burden's mansion; Erasmus is incarcerated in a cage in the Burden home after being captured by a team of zoologists, and Madelene feels imprisoned in her marriage to Adam.

During their cohabitation of the Burden mansion, Madelene repeatedly encounters the ape at close range. She enters the cage housing Erasmus inside the mansion. On her first visit to the cage she "crossed over to the animal one pace at a time until they were about ten feet apart", and on her second visit she "seated herself on a branch" directly in front of the ape.

Later in the novel, after Madelene and Erasmus escape from the Burden mansion and flee human society together, their physical intimacy is amplified. They take up residence in an animal sanctuary on the outskirts of London. There, they live together, naked, in a tree for seven weeks.

In *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, the central human character Goldie Sullivan and the central animal character, the gander, are also forced to cohabitate in a confined space. Goldie rescues the injured bird after it has been struck by lightning in the grounds of the local cemetery and conveys it to the small house out the back of the former milk bar. There, the woman and the bird live in seclusion from the surrounding human community and the wider animal kingdom.

From the moment Goldie first encounters the bird their interaction is physically intimate. When she discovers the injured, unconscious bird she touches it, embraces it, and carries it in her arms. Back at the shop, Goldie cleans blood and dirt from the bird's feathers with a sponge, and then cradles the bird in her arms while she arranges it in a child's cot. She studies the bird's physical appearance and bodily functions at close range.

### *Direct Physical Confrontation*

The close proximity shared by the human and animal characters in the modern literary fairy tales leads them to direct physical confrontation with one another. Confrontation is often violent, with the animal characters physically attacking the humans, yet direct physical contact between the human and animal characters is also sometimes gentle and affectionate.



In two of the novels, the close proximity between the human and animal characters leads them to violent physical exchanges. In both novels, the human and animal characters come to blows as they seek to establish and maintain territorial boundaries in confined environments.

In *Life of Pi*, Richard Parker is particularly vicious toward his human companion. The tiger repeatedly strikes Pi with his paws, sending the boy overboard on multiple occasions. Pi says, "I was terrified before, during and after each attack, and I spent a long time shivering with fear".

In *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, when the gander regains consciousness and mobility within the confines of Goldie's residence, it attacks her.

The physical closeness between the human and animal characters also leads to interaction that is gentle, affectionate and even tender at times.

In *Women and the Ape*, Erasmus the ape performs an extraordinary gesture of kindness that demonstrates the animal's concern for Madelene's wellbeing.

The second time Madelene, a self-pitying alcoholic, enters the cage housing Erasmus in the Burden mansion, she carries a carafe of "55% proof ethyl alcohol". When she goes to take a "swig" from the carafe, she finds she is unable to because "some sort of plank had been placed on top of [the carafe]".

"Her eye ran the length of the plank and met the ape's eye. It had put its hand over the glass.

Madelene backed away.

'No,' she said. 'You're probably right.'" (Heg: 53)

Rather than acting violently toward his human counterpart, Erasmus the ape empathises with Madelene's alcoholism and offers a simple and gentle gesture demonstrating his concern for her wellbeing.

Similarly, in *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, interaction between Goldie and the gander is at times tender and affectionate. The close physical proximity to one another produces moments of gentle intimacy and earlier barriers and conflict between them are broken down.

"[Goldie and the goose] stared at one another, taking it in turns to blink. Slowly, Goldie raised her hand toward the bird's face. It leaned forward and rubbed its head against her hand, massaging its temple in her palm. The feathers were thick, but soft. Goldie's heart was pounding in her chest."

In the three modern literary fairy tales, the humans and animals are forced to interact with, and comprehend one another in confined spaces. As a result of this close physical proximity, the relationships between humans and animals are emotionally charged. Encountering animals at close range triggers a wide range of heightened emotional responses from the human characters.

### **3.2. Psychologically Intense Bonds**

In this section I will discuss the emotional and psychological nature of the human animal relationships in the three modern literary fairy tales. What sort of

psychological connections do the characters form, and in what ways are the human and animal characters emotionally connected?

### *Emotionally Charged Encounters*

The human and animal characters in the three modern literary fairy tales establish deep psychological and emotional bonds from the moment they encounter one another. Initial encounters between the human and animal characters are sudden, unexpected and dramatic, triggering a range of heightened emotional responses from the human characters.

As has been discussed in Chapter One, when the animal characters first appear in each of the novels, they place their lives in the hands of the central human characters, issuing them with a request for mercy. At the same time, the animals present the human characters with a reflection of their own plight, and are used as metaphorical representations of the human characters' physical and emotional status. As a result, encounters between the humans and animals are a mix of being awe-inspiring, terrifying, fortifying and comforting.

In *Life of Pi*, the initial encounter between Richard Parker and Pi (when the tiger appears drowning in the ocean) is extremely dramatic and emotionally charged. The tiger's appearance triggers extreme conflicting emotions in Pi. Initially the sight of the tiger is comforting. Pi is pleased to see Richard Parker and calls out to him, "How good to see you Richard Parker. Come to the lifeboat. We'll be together". Richard Parker was one of the zoo animals sharing Pi's family's voyage to start a new life in Canada. His appearance raises Pi's hopes that there will be other survivors from the sunken ship, and

Pi decides to respond to the tiger's appeal for mercy by throwing a life buoy from his small boat.

However, Pi's gratitude at the appearance of the tiger is quickly replaced by feelings of terror and fear as he realises that rescuing Richard Parker means having to share the lifeboat with him: "Wait a second. Together? We'll be together? Have I gone mad?".

Martel also uses Richard Parker's initial appearance in the narrative as a metaphorical representation of Pi's predicament. The tiger's helpless situation is a reflection of Pi's plight. As Pi gravely notes: "We were, literally and figuratively, in the same boat".

In *Woman and the Ape*, the initial encounter between Madelene Burden and Erasmus the ape is a similarly unexpected, emotionally charged experience that leads to the formation of a deep psychological connection between the human and the animal.

Prior to the ape's arrival at the Burden mansion, Madelene is intoxicated and obsessed with her appearance, busy preparing her evening attire with "ethyl alcohol exuding from [her] pores". When she becomes aware that "all of the furniture in the room had been pushed back against the walls...with the exception of one large surgical lamp", she asks Adam, her husband, "Is there going to be dancing?". She is blissfully unaware of the visitor who is about to enter her home.

When the ape does arrive, it enters the Burden mansion with a tremendous sense of drama and intrigue. Heg writes: "Out of the darkness and silence there came first footsteps and then a flash of white. Two men wheeled a hospital trolley into the room. The trolley ... was covered with a thin blue sheet under which Madelene could discern the outline of a body."

When the sheet is removed and the ape is revealed, Madelene has a heightened emotional reaction. She is overwhelmed and entranced: "For a moment ... the only thing that existed was the ape. Madelene [was] drawn towards the creature ... she forgot her tight skin and high heels. She could hear the animal's breathing, thick with mucus, drugged. Silence reigned in the room. But somewhere in that silence a secret dialogue had struck up".

Like Richard Parker's appearance in *Life of Pi*, Erasmus' appearance issues Madelene with a non-verbal request for mercy. While Madelene does not actively respond to the ape's request for assistance, she does strike up a deep, instant connection, a "secret dialogue", with Erasmus.

Heg also uses the ape as a metaphorical reflection of Madelene's plight. While the ape is "drugged", Madelene is inebriated. Madelene's husband, Adam, registers the similarity in the plight of the two creatures. When Madelene passes out next to the ape, he notes: "her heavy snores sounded exactly like the ape's".

In *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, the initial encounter between Goldie Sullivan and the gander is also sudden and triggers a heightened emotional reaction from Goldie. The gander enters the narrative as the result of a random and unexpected act of nature (a bolt of lightening connecting with a church bell tower).

Goldie's immediate response to the bird's arrival, to offer assistance, is similar to Pi's reaction to Richard Parker's request for mercy. It is also similar to Madelene's unconscious, internalised response to the ape. While Madelene strikes up a secret dialogue with the ape, Goldie interprets the bird as "an omen" and a "messenger with wings". Both women welcome or accept the arrival of the animal into their respective lives because they believe, either consciously or otherwise, that the animal has come to

inform or sponsor them in some way.

As is the case in the other two novels, the arrival of the bird in *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar* also presents Goldie with a reflection of her own plight. The bird has been severed from its flock, mirroring Goldie's alienation from the human community surrounding her.

### *Enduring Psychological Connections*

Beyond their initial encounters, the human and animal characters develop enduring psychological bonds. The human and animal characters form co-dependent relationships and, united by a mutual desire for survival, and their alienation from usual human and animal habitats, they develop companionship.

In *Life of Pi*, the cumulative effect of the tiger's presence is that Richard Parker fortifies Pi's emotional state. He grants Pi the courage, companionship and insight to survive his ordeal lost at sea.

Firstly, Richard Parker's continuing presence on the lifeboat leads Pi to regain his senses and fully comprehend his predicament. Then, the clarity and sense of security Richard Parker inspires in Pi helps to restore Pi's will to live. However, perhaps the most significant aspect of the psychological bond between Richard Parker and Pi is the development of companionship. At times throughout the novel the tiger ceases to be adversarial and offers Pi comfort and familiarity.

In *Woman and the Ape*, Erasmus and Madelene also forge an enduring psychological bond. When Erasmus and Madelene meet for the second time, in the cage housing the ape inside the Burden mansion, the ape scrutinises Madelene's alcohol

consumption, tests her self-awareness and offers Madelene a way forward, clear of her dependence on alcohol. The ape offers her a peach. The peach metaphorically represents nourishment and sobriety and Madelene accepts the offering. This illustrates that the ape has an understanding of Madelene's predicament and a willingness to free her from it.

In *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, Goldie Sullivan and the gander also form an ongoing psychological bond. Firstly, the bird's presence awakens Goldie's maternal instincts. The morning after Goldie has rescued the injured bird she awakes to find it stirring in a baby's cot. She inspects the bird and is overwhelmed by the desire to mother the creature.

"[The bird] triggered something in Goldie. She felt concern and affection in waves and felt compelled to hold the bird in her arms, to comfort it with kisses and lullabies, and to nurse it off to sleep."

As a result of their shared circumstances, both being fugitives from wider human and animal societies, Goldie and the gander become companions. Once trust has been established between them, the gander reawakens Goldie's social tendencies. The bird's presence conjures nostalgia and romanticism in Goldie and the bird becomes her drinking and dancing partner. The gander also supports Goldie emotionally. In a weakened state, Goldie expresses her grief for the death of her son, and the gander comforts her.

### 3.3. Sexual Relations

In this section I will discuss the sexual nature of relationships between the human and animal characters in the modern literary fairy tales. Do the human and animal characters relate to one another sexually? Do the characters experience sexual arousal, and if so, is it mutual? Do they engage in explicit sexual encounters with one another?

#### *Innocent Arousal*

In two of the novels, relationships between the human and animal characters extend into the sexual realm. In both cases the sexual dimension is added when physical barriers are removed, and only once strong emotional and psychological bonds have been established between the characters.

Sometimes the sexual interaction between the human and animal characters is an extension of their mutual desire to make sense of and explore one another's physicality and the boundaries that exist between them.

In *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, the close physical relationship between Goldie and the gander encompasses sexually charged interaction. As an extension of the mutual affection they develop, and the close physical proximity they share, the woman and the bird gradually begin to explore one another's physicality. Interaction of this kind is often sexually arousing for Goldie.

At other points, the sexually charged nature of interaction between Goldie and the goose evolves from the physical intimacy the characters have developed and the



desire they have to express their affection for one another. A good example of this is when Goldie invites the bird into her bed to become her sleeping partner.

### *Explicit Sexual Relations*

Interaction between human and animal characters also, at times, involves sexual stimulation and intercourse. While Goldie and the goose experience innocent sexual encounters that are driven by a need to better understand one another physically, in *Woman and the Ape*, Madelene Burden and Erasmus the ape fully consummate their relationship as a result of a need to express their love for one another, and are also united by a mutual pursuit of pleasure and the desire to procreate.

Through her relationship with Erasmus, Madelene's discovers an outlet for her emotional isolation and longing for intimacy. With Erasmus, Madelene experiences a closeness she has not experienced with her husband, Adam. A good example of this is when Madelene gives Erasmus an "anatomy lesson". The intimacy Madelene and Erasmus develop quickly becomes highly sexually charged. Madelene's anatomy lesson encompasses the identification and exploration of hers and Erasmus' sexual organs.

In her sexual union with Erasmus, Madelene is liberated from the empty sexual encounters she shares with Adam Burden. When Erasmus seduces Madelene in their "pornographic Garden of Eden", in the animal sanctuary on the outskirts of London, he ignites a newfound level of rampant sexual desire in her. Madelene and Erasmus' sexual union coincides with the formation of deep mutual love and adoration. Heg writes of how Madelene is possessed by love: "Love took possession of them and did with them as it pleased."

### **Chapter Three Conclusion**

Analysis of the three texts demonstrates that the central human and animal characters form deep psychological bonds, and that their relationships are physically intimate and emotionally intense, and sometimes even sexual in nature. The physical nature of the human animal relationships in the three texts is strikingly similar. In each of the novels the central human and animal characters are engaged in unique, extremely intimate physical relationships. They experience enforced cohabitation in unusual habitats and engage in direct physical confrontation.

As a result of their enforced cohabitation and ongoing close physical proximity in extraordinary settings, the human and animal characters in the three novels establish and develop strong emotional and psychological connections. The animal characters issue the human characters a request for mercy and present them with a reflection of their own plight, conjuring a range of heightened emotional reactions from the human characters. The physical closeness between the characters emotionally charges their relationships. Deep, unspoken bonds are formed between the human and animal characters from their initial encounters and the characters form enduring co-dependent companionship.

In all three novels the central human and animal characters are united by their alienation from usual human and animal habitats and by a mutual desire for survival. Their relationships fortify the human and animal characters against antagonistic forces. Pi Patel and Richard Parker both want to survive the ordeal of being lost at sea and want to reach land. Both Erasmus and Madelene Burden want to experience freedom; they

both want to escape incarceration in the human world. Goldie Sullivan and the gander are both eager to resume their rightful place in their respective societies.

While there is no sexual dimension to the relationship between Pi Patel and the tiger, Richard Parker, relationships between the central human and animal characters in the other two novels do encompass a sexual dimension. In *The Goose at Goldie's Milk Bar*, and in *Woman and the Ape*, sexual activity between the humans and animals is an extension of their physical and psychological bonds.

Examples presented in the three texts demonstrate that human and animal characters encountering one another in settings outside of usual habitats forge emotionally charged psychological bonds that sometimes lead to the development of sexual relationships.

The depth and multi-faceted nature of human animal relationships in the three texts serves to suggest that writers of modern literary fairy tales use relationships between humans and animals to explore the possibilities of bonds between them. The complex and detailed physical and psychological human animal interaction portrayed in the three texts, which takes place between unique human and animal characters in extraordinary settings, pushes beyond the boundaries of what would normally be considered usual human and animal interaction. The three modern literary fairy tales illustrate human animal interaction in extraordinary circumstances and explore the physical and psychological ramifications.

Perhaps writers of modern literary fairy tales seek to excite the reader's imagination, or to awaken the reader to the possibilities of relationships with animals beyond usual human understanding or experience. Also, the writers of the modern literary fairy tales appear to reflect changing attitudes to the role or status of animals in

human society.

This speculation echoes the theories relating to the enlarged dimensions of human and animal bonds developed by English animal behaviour scientist, Rupert Sheldrake. In his study of human and animal interaction, Sheldrake argues animals reveal extraordinary and unexplained powers through their interaction with humans. His research includes scientific investigation of reports of perceived unusual animal behaviour, which includes dogs that know when their owners are returning home, cats that answer telephones when a person to whom they are attached is calling and other animals that anticipate earthquakes or are able to find their way home over unfamiliar terrain. After systematic analysis, Sheldrake concludes:

“These are some of the aspects of animal behaviour that suggest the existence of forms of perceptiveness that lie beyond present-day scientific understanding.”  
(Sheldrake: xiv)

Depictions of human animal relationships in the three modern literary fairy tales suggest that animals are not just meat on our tables, modes of transport, pets or untamed antagonistic forces. Rather, they seek to illustrate animals as worthy companions with whom humans can develop sophisticated, meaningful and enduring physical and psychological relationships. This assertion ties in closely with the theories of American academic, Mary Allen.

Allen argues that “animals have served literature well” by performing a long list of roles and functions. She notes: “They have stood as allegorical figures to represent human nature and as a rich body of metaphors for the inanimate as well as the animate.

Beyond their figurative uses, animals have been [humanity's] servants, [our] companions, the objects of [our] hunt, and the food on [our] table". However, she also points out that, when it comes to certain genres (including fairy tales), "sometimes [animals] have been allowed to play their own parts". Allen argues that there are many examples where "animals ... operate as the instigator of [people's] actions or ... are equals [to humans]". She states:

"Over time the animal has emerged as a powerful actor in the drama, bringing about significant responses from [humanity]." (Allen: 24)

One role in which animals have emerged over recent years as powerful actors in the drama is as the object and reciprocator of human affection and romantic love. In an article for the *Economist* magazine, titled *Monkeying About with the Novel*, novelist Will Self, reviews contemporary novels that deal with the experiences of humans and animals falling in love, one of which is Heg's *Woman and the Ape*. Self argues: "The joint fascination with seriously crossbreed love is more than coincidence. Evidently, romance with animals is in. Novelists have already worked their way through most of the transgressions. Now it is animals, emerging from centuries of being worshipped by humans, who are expressing their desires and doing the things they want with us humans".

American novelist, Sarah Ellis argues that the multi-dimensional bonds that exist between humans and animals offer writers the opportunity to reflect on human nature. She writes: "The contemplation of animals can lead to a fresh view of our humanity, our values, our preoccupations, and how we order our lives, both individually and in

society. In fiction, if not in our real lives, the presence of an animal often leads us to discover what is essential about ourselves.”

## CONCLUSION

The nature of human animal relationships in the three modern literary fairy tales is strikingly similar. The central human and the central animal characters in the tales perform or fulfil similar character roles and narrative functions, undergo physical, social and psychological transformation and establish and develop complex physical, emotional and psychological bonds.

To a large extent the central human and animal characters perform the archetypal roles and associated functions of the hero and the donor, as specified by Propp. Analysis of the three modern literary fairy tales reveals that the animal characters subject the human protagonist to a series of tests or challenges, and that once the human characters have overcome or passed these tests, the animal characters grant assistance.

However, the human and animal characters also subvert or reinvent established character role conventions. In the three chosen modern fairy tales the central human and animal characters swap, change or share the roles and functions they perform. The roles of the hero and the donor are sometimes fluid, and sometimes the lines defining the roles are blurred, or expanded upon resulting in richer, more complex psychological connections between the human and animal characters.

In the three modern literary fairy tales, the type of physical and psychological transformation the animal characters experience adheres to Zipes' theory of miraculous transformation. The animal characters are imbued with supernatural human consciousness, acquire advanced communication skills and assume human appearance, stretching the realms of what would usually be considered reality by the human characters.

However, the nature of human transformation in the texts extends beyond Zipes' theories. While the central human characters do experience a change in social status, the change is not strictly an elevation or improvement in marital status and wealth. Rather, the human characters earn or regain citizenship, or acceptance and inclusion, in a new society.

Relationships between the human and animal characters in the three texts are physically intimate and psychologically intense, and they often extend into the sexual realm. The human and animal characters in the three novels also establish and develop strong emotional and psychological connections. The animal characters issue the human characters a request for mercy and present them with a reflection of their own plight, conjuring a range of heightened emotional reactions from the human characters. Deep, unspoken bonds are formed between the human and animal characters from their initial encounters and the characters form enduring co-dependent companionship. In each tale, the central human and animal characters are also united by their alienation from usual human and animal habitats and by a mutual desire for survival.

The complex, detailed and often magical (or supernaturally enhanced) physical and psychological human animal interaction portrayed in the three texts, which takes place between unique human and animal characters in extraordinary settings, pushes beyond the boundaries of what would normally be considered usual human and animal interaction.

The relationships in the texts reflect changing attitudes to the role or status of animals in human society by depicting animals as worthy companions with whom humans can develop sophisticated, meaningful and enduring physical and psychological relationships. They also promote the notion that animals are magically or



supernaturally imbued with the power or ability to incite change and bring about positive transformation in the lives of humans and use animals as a tool to manifest ongoing internal change in the human characters.

The three modern literary fairy tales offer the space or room for exploration and detailed description of the gradual psychological transformation of human characters and for the embellishment of the internal worlds of characters. They each seek to excite the reader's imagination, or to awaken the reader to the possibilities of relationships with animals beyond usual human understanding or experience.

In conclusion, the three texts suggest the existence of a unique convention for human animal relationships in modern literary fairy tales; they serve to increase human appreciation for, and understanding of, the power and possibilities of human and animal interaction.

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# **THE GOOSE AT GOLDIE'S MILK BAR**

**DION TEASDALE**

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"It is the thunderbolt that steers the course of all things."

*Anonymous*

"In my country, there is an old belief that if a bird flies into your home it is an angel who has come to guide you and you must look at its presence as a blessing from God."

*Andre Dubus III*

*House of Sand and Fog*

"Migratory birds, geese winter in limited localities far south of their breeding grounds. In migration they are greeted everywhere as harbingers of the changing seasons."

*Encyclopaedia Britannica*

"Mind if I take a gander around the shop?"

"No. As long as he's housetrained."

*Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers*

*The Goon Show*

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I

## **- PAGES FROM THE PAST -**

*The Valley Advertiser, July 13, 1953*

### **INFANT'S DISAPPEARANCE BAFFLING**

THE DISAPPEARANCE of a baby boy, taken from his mother's Baxters Creek home in the middle of the night, has police baffled. The child, three-week-old Thomas Sullivan, was last seen in the late hours of Friday, 9 July.

The boy's mother, Goldie Sullivan, told police she left the child asleep in a cot next to the fireplace in her Monty Street residence shortly before midnight.

Miss Sullivan, the proprietor of the Monty Street Milk Bar, reported hearing a disturbance at the rear of her property at around 2.30am and, upon investigating found the child's cot empty and the boy missing.

The boy's disappearance sparked an

extensive early morning search of the neighbourhood and surrounding bush. Local police sergeant, Terry McCutcheon, was assisted in the search by police officers from across the district, members of the fire brigade and more than 100 local residents.

At the time of going to print, the search was being continued with a team of farm dogs being enlisted to help scour the dense scrub along the banks of Baxters Creek.

Sgt McCutcheon announced yesterday (Monday) that the search was yet to uncover any trace of the missing child and he appealed for anyone with information about the boy's disappearance to come forward.

*The Valley Advertiser, July 13, 1953*

## **STORMS WREAK HAVOC**

WILD storms have wreaked havoc across Baxters Creek Shire for the past week, causing flash flooding, blackouts, fires and loss of livestock.

The storms arrived last Wednesday evening, 7 July, bringing torrential rain, deafening thunder and terrifying displays of lightning.

Several outlying dairy farms were flooded within the first 24 hours. A number of families had to be evacuated and there have been reports of many heads of cattle being lost.

The creek broke its banks on the outskirts of town late on Thursday evening. Local residents worked through the night to protect nearby houses with sand bags.

In the early hours of Saturday morning the skies above Baxters Creek were lit up with one of the most ferocious electric storms ever observed in the town.

Almost a dozen trees around the town were struck by lightning, triggering four scrub fires.

The giant oak tree planted at the centre of Memorial Park in 1873, by the town's founder, Henry Taylor, was one of the trees struck by lightning.

Baxters Creek resident Harold Digby, 82, who has lived his entire life in the town, said the storm was the worst he had ever witnessed.

"The sky was lit up with fireworks. I thought the end had come," he said.

*The Valley Advertiser, July 20, 1953*

## **GRAVE FEARS HELD FOR MISSING BABY**

POLICE hold grave fears for the welfare of a three-week-old baby boy who went missing from his mother's Baxters Creek home more than 10 days ago.

The child, Thomas Sullivan, was taken from a cot in the residence at the rear of the Monty Street Milk Bar, while his mother, Goldie Sullivan, slept in an adjoining room.

Police, assisted by more than 150 local residents, have been searching for the boy since his disappearance, but so far they have failed to uncover any trace of the child.

It is alleged an intruder entered the milk bar residence in the early hours of Saturday, 10 July, and kidnapped the boy.

The boy's mother, Miss Sullivan, has been

assisting police and locals with the search.

Baxters Creek police sergeant Terry McCutcheon has again pleaded for anyone who might know of the child's whereabouts, to contact him.

"The situation is looking pretty grim," he told the *Advertiser*.

"The longer this child is missing, the less likelihood there is of a good outcome."

Sgt McCutcheon said efforts to locate the child had been hampered by flooding and damage caused by last week's fierce storms.

*The Valley Advertiser, July 27, 1953*

## **BOY FOUND IN CREEK**

THE BODY of a baby boy, taken in the middle of the night from a cot in his mother's house earlier this month, was found in Baxters Creek two days ago.

Local resident, Gordon Tankerton, discovered the child's body floating in shallow muddy water near the Monty Street Bridge in the early hours of Sunday morning, July 25.

Mr Tankerton was walking his dog along the bank of the creek on the boundary of Memorial Park when he made the gruesome find shortly after 9.30am.

"The boy was floating face up with the sleeve of his jacket caught on a snag," Mr Tankerton said.

Police recovered the child's body and

conveyed it to the home of Miss Goldie Sullivan for identification.

Miss Sullivan confirmed the child's body was that of her three-week old son, Thomas, missing since July 9.

The discovery of the boy's body has sent shock waves through the local community.

Baxters Creek Shire president, Barry Bourke, said the find was a tragedy for the entire town and urged police to investigate the matter fully.

"Who would want to do something like this?" he said.

"It sends a chill through your soul to think someone in our community could be capable of this boy's death."

## **BABY ELECTROFIED: CORONER**

ELECTROCUTION by lightning strike has been identified as the cause of a Baxters Creek baby boy's death earlier this year.

A city-based coroner ruled last week that three-week-old Thomas Sullivan, who was taken from his mother's home on the night of July 9, most likely died as a result of electrocution.

Medical evidence tabled at the inquiry concluded the boy had sustained injuries consistent with a massive electric shock to the upper torso, neck and forearms.

A senior Government weather expert argued that it was possible the child had been hit by lightning during a freak electrical storm on, or around, the evening he went missing from his mother's care.

The coroner, Mr Wallace Pettleblight, said he was satisfied with the evidence given, but said it had been impossible to conclude which, if any, person or persons could

legally be said to have had a hand in the child's death.

"It is unlikely that a child just three weeks of age could have found itself exposed to lightning without the assistance of another, but the identity of other persons involved remains a mystery," his report reads.

Baxters Creek police sergeant Terry McCutcheon, who also gave evidence at the hearing, said police had found no evidence of an intruder forcing entry to the child's home. He said the boy's mother, Goldie Sullivan, had remained adamant that her son had been asleep in a cot when she last saw him. He also said police had been unable to locate the father of the boy, and that they would continue to seek his whereabouts.



## - PRESENT DAY -

A violent clap of thunder woke Goldie shortly after midnight. She sat upright in bed, and began counting under her breath. One one-thousand. Two-one thousand. Three one-thousand. Her heart was pounding in her chest and she could feel beads of sweat on her forehead and lower back. She pushed the blankets away, lit the candle on the table beside her bed and reached for her notebook and pencil.

*July 2, 1973*

*12.03am*

*A big one tonight.*

*Deep and swollen and angry.*

*Not far off.*

She listened as the thunder dissipated to a low, menacing rumble and the storm rolled in. The tin on the roof of her rundown house rattled in the wind, and neighbourhood dogs began to howl. Then the rain came; heavy on the windows at first, and then pelting down on the roof like stones. And then another blast of thunder, this time growling and snarling directly above. One one-thousand. Two one-thousand. Bang.

*12.05am*

*Right on top of us now.*

*Very loud.*

*Terrifying.*

Goldie found her slippers with her feet and shuffled to the bedroom window, notebook and pencil in hand. She peeled the curtain back, just a fraction, and took a peek. No moon in sight. The clouds were dark. The sky was almost pitch black. She jotted again in the notebook.

*12.07am*

*No sign of electrical activity.*

She ditched the slippers for a pair of muddy boots at the end of her bed, donned a tattered green rain jacket and headed for the back door. On her way she stuffed her notebook and pencil in a waterproof satchel, and grabbed a black, dome shaped umbrella from the hatstand in the hall. It took her some time to unlock the latches on the door, but once she was out, she fled down the steps on the back porch to the far corner of the yard and disappeared through a hidden gap in the fence.

## - NOT MUCH AT FIRST GLANCE -

On the outskirts of town, Kevin released his foot from the accelerator and pulled over to the side of the road. He unfurled a map on the passenger seat next to him and traced the red line marked Dirrigans Road with a finger. It veered off the main highway towards the east, across the floor of Restitution Valley, and connected with Monty Street at an intersection north of the Tapestry River's main tributary, Baxters Creek. The creek, a faint blue squiggle on the map, circled the town named in its honour.

Kevin checked his wristwatch, calculated the remaining distance, and drove off in search of Monty Street.

He reached the creek, a trickle of mountain water babbling over polished stones and rocks, and crossed the dilapidated one-lane bridge spanning it only a moment or two before the town itself came into view. Monty Street opened up in front of him like a cardboard scene in a vintage pop-up book, unfolding along the gentle slope of a small gully. At the top of the street a well-maintained park with benches, paths and a rotunda eased from the side of the road gently down to the creek. Wattle and eucalyptus skirted its boundaries. Near the street, at the edge of the park, painted in bold cursive letters, a sign read, 'Welcome to Baxters Creek. Population 303'. Just beyond the park loomed a two-storey, redbrick pub, the *Taylors Arms*, with its slanted first floor wooden balcony badly in need of repair. The footpath out the front was littered with chalkboard signs screaming cheap meals, budget accommodation and cold beer. Directly across from the pub was the office of the town's newspaper, the *Valley Advertiser*. Kevin brought the car

to a stop at a forty-five degree angle out the front and unbuckled himself. He retrieved his camera from a bag on the back seat and stepped onto the street. He checked his watch again. There was just enough time for a quick look around.

A row of four brown brick shops stood next to the pub; a newsagents, a butchers, a bakery and a fish 'n' chip shop. Further along there was a Chinese restaurant, the *Emperors Dragon*, with bamboo blinds rolled down in the window, and two oriental paper lanterns above the door swinging gently in the breeze. Up on a ridge, behind the shops, a small white church with a bell tower mounted on its roof, rose up into the sky. Through the trees, Kevin could make out the grounds of a cemetery, and a small car park brimming with vehicles. He could hear the faint thumping of a pump organ and the strained voices of the local congregation engaged in Sunday morning worship.

Next door to the newspaper office was *Bourkes Real Estate*. A dozen properties were on display in the window; acreage with stables and dams, farmhouses backing onto the bush, and cottages with bungalows out the back just five minutes walk from town. Three empty blocks past the estate office, right at the end of the street, there was a derelict shop, slumped next to the footpath and overgrown with weeds and ivy vines. Kevin went for a closer look.

On the front of the shop there was a crooked wooden door nailed shut. A corrugated-iron barricade had been erected across the entrance, and the shop's two large display windows were plastered over from the inside with the pages of old, yellowed newspapers. On the outside, the window was caked with mud and laced with cobwebs.

Kevin took the lens cap of his camera and tried to frame up the shop front in the viewfinder. As he took the photo he made out the lettering on a rusted sign hanging

from the shop's dented awning. It read: *Monty Street Milk Bar*.

A hacking cough, coming from a distance, distracted Kevin from his photography. He turned and saw an elderly man standing on the first floor balcony of the pub, clad in pyjama pants and a grubby singlet.

The man lit a cigarette and coughed violently after the first drag. Kevin waved.

'Morning,' he said, making his way back up the street to his car.

The old man watched him, but did not reply.

When he arrived on the kerb outside the newspaper office, Kevin noted how one leg of the man's pyjamas was pinned up above the knee. He wanted to take a photo, but didn't like the chances of gaining the approval of his subject.

A white Holden Statesman appeared at the top of the street and pulled into the kerb next to Kevin's car. A portly gentleman emerged from the driver's seat; a proud, bulldog shaped man with a red nose and thinning hair, slicked back and glistening with Bryl Cream in the morning sun. There were large purple veins at his temples. The man's stomach lurched over the buckle of his pants.

'How you doing, son?' the man said, waving a chubby hand in the air.

He slammed the car door and adjusted his crotch.

'Sorry I'm late. Traffic was a nightmare,' he said, chuckling to himself.

Kevin noted the man's attire with alarm. His tight suit pants and jacket were two conflicting shades of brown and his thick black tie, jutting out in a knot at his neck, looked as if it was strangling him.

'Alexander Bourke. Shire President. Licensed Real Estate Agent,' the man said,

taking hold of Kevin's hand and shaking it firmly. His fingers were moist and grubby.

'I'm the Welcoming Committee,' he said. 'You must be Dwyer.'

Kevin nodded.

'Well welcome to Baxter's Creek. Have any trouble finding us?'

'I had a map,' Kevin said.

The Shire President looked him up and down. He was younger than expected, and too thin. With his pressed navy suit and hair smoothed into a side part, he looked like a schoolboy. His skin was rose pink. He smelt like soap. There was something girlish about the shape of his face.

'Not much at first glance,' Alexander said, fumbling a set of keys in his trouser pocket. 'But we've got big plans for our little town. You'll see.'

He climbed the steps to the front door of the newspaper office and pushed a key into the lock.

Kevin looked up and noticed the old man on the balcony at the pub, still watching. He waved again, but the man turned and disappeared into his room.

'I wouldn't bother with him,' Alexander said. 'Grab your things. I'll give you a tour.'

Kevin went to the boot of his car. For a moment he contemplated getting in the driver's seat and heading back the way he'd come. But instead, he retrieved his suitcase and a box of books, and followed the Shire President to the flat upstairs.

## **- A COLD FRONT IS EXPECTED -**

Travis Handley stood naked on the front porch of his grandfather's farmhouse perched high on a hill five kilometres west of town, a mug of tea threaded onto two of his muscular, sun-tanned fingers. He looked out across the valley, noting the clouds on the horizon, and nudged away the cool air teasing his testicles. Below him, rooftops of Baxter's Creek poked up through the trees. One, with four television aerials and six chimneys, belonged to the pub. Another, with one chimney, was the roof of Dr Gibbon's surgery. The spire with the bell on top, reaching higher than the others, was part of the church.

The fly screen door creaked open behind him. Betty, his elderly work dog, hobbled over to him, her long claws tapping on the deck, and sat at his feet. Travis dropped a hand to the top of her head and scratched a spot between her ears. Tea sloshed over the lip of the mug onto his toes. Betty winced as she bent down to lick the milky spillage. Her arthritis had worsened, just as the vet had predicted.

'Good girl,' Travis said.

He set the mug down in front of her and went inside to dress.

By the time Travis had pulled his pants and boots on, Betty was waiting for him in the driveway, hoping to get a lift onto the tray of his ute.

'You can sit up front with me today,' Travis said, pulling open the passenger door and helping her onto the seat.

As they drove down the hill, Betty licked the hairs on Travis' arm, and the radio

crackled. Travis strained to make sense of the weather forecast.

‘... a cold front is expected to sweep across ...’

‘... heavy showers and thunderstorms for most of ...’

‘... strong wind warnings have been ...’

‘... advised to be on the look out for electrical activity ...’

Travis gave the dashboard a thump with his fist. The radio promptly hissed and fell silent.



When they pulled up at the Peddley farm, Betty was fast asleep. Travis slipped out of the ute hoping not to disturb her. It would be easier to get things done not having to worry about her getting tangled up in his feet.

‘Morning love,’ Mary greeted him from the kitchen door, a scarf concealing rollers in her hair and an apron around her waist.

‘G’day, Mrs Peddley,’ Travis said, leaping up the steps two at a time to greet her.

She was the kind of farmer’s wife his mother had been. She wore a light cotton floral dress that was snug around her hips and tight across her breasts. Her skin was the colour of eggshells. She smelled of cinnamon. Vegetable peelings had stained her fingertips. She had thin legs, tiny ankles and wore house scuffs on her feet.

‘Take a seat,’ she said, pointing to a cushioned wicker chair on the verandah next to a small cloth covered table.

‘Coffee?’

Travis shook his head eagerly and surveyed the spread; a bowl of freshly whipped, vanilla scented cream, a jar of home-made plum and raspberry jam and a



batch of scones, straight from the oven, wrapped and steaming in a tea towel.

Mary handed Travis a knife and plate, then sat down and poured them both a cup. She was pleased to see him and studied his face. He had his father's roguish, handsome scruffiness, yet there were traces of his mother's kindness in his dark, knowing eyes.

'Thanks for coming here on your day off. It means a lot to us.'

Mary swallowed sharply.

Travis could see she was holding back tears.

'No worries Mrs P,' he said, giving her a wink. 'What do you want me to do?'

She took a deep breath and cleared her throat. There were holes in the fences all the way along the bottom paddocks and the pump had stopped working in the top dam. One of the bulls was loose in the yard. The roof of the chicken coop needed repairs.

'I'll get straight onto it,' Travis said, wiping cream from the corners of his mouth.

'How's Don doing?'

'No change, love,' Mary said, rubbing her hands on her knees. 'Still waiting on the test results. Should come back this week. We'll wait and see.'

There was a long silence between them. Travis didn't know how to respond. Mary didn't know what else she could say.

'Better get to it,' he said, jumping to his feet. 'Thanks for the feed.'



In the kitchen, Mary heard Donald calling out. She took off her apron and went to him. He was slumped under sheets in the bedroom, his face colourless and moist with perspiration.

'Who's here?' Is that you Ginny?' he said, staring vacantly beyond the doorway.

Mary took a cloth from the basin of water on the side table and mopped his brow.

'It's Travis. He's come to fix the chook shed for us.'

'Where's Ginny?' Donald said, straining to bring himself up onto his elbows.

Mary looked down and saw the sheets had turned brown. The odour of her husband's bowels filled the room.

'Jesus,' Donald said, crying out in pain.

Mary went to the bathroom to fetch towels and a bucket and cursed under her breath. Ordinarily she was patient and tolerant. She'd spent nearly forty years being married to Donald and was accustomed to doing things for him. Yet, she felt having to wipe his arse was beyond the terms of their arrangement. She took gloves from the sink and went back to the bedroom, refusing to breath through her nose.

'You're a good girl Ginny,' Donald said when Mary had finished wiping up the mess. 'Always a good girl'.

'Its me Don. Mary. Ginny isn't with us anymore.'

She stood over him for a moment, hoping he might recognise her. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Donald had been a strong man. It was difficult watching him waste away.

Mary went back to the kitchen and cried as she made a batch of curried eggs for Travis' lunch.



Down in the bottom paddock, Travis was mending fences. A flock of cockatoos

suddenly shot across the sky, their screeches ringing out across the farm. Travis froze, paralysed by the feeling that somewhere life would soon expire and there was nothing he could do about it. Out the corner of one eye he saw Betty limping toward him, her tail wagging in the air behind her.

## **- NEIGHBOURS -**

The flat above the newspaper office wasn't much more than two small rooms; a bathroom with a toilet and rudimentary laundry facilities, and a bedroom with a kitchenette built into one corner. A single bed, an armchair and a small wardrobe with matching chest of drawers were the only furnishings, except for the pedestal lamp, the large amber glass ashtray and the framed print of Queen Elizabeth II, which made the place seem like a motel. Kevin wondered if the rooms at the pub would be any better.

He noted the flat had been cleaned before his arrival. Streaks of detergent were visible on the sink and bench tops and the rooms were lemon scented. There were two sets of fresh linen on the end of the bed. A clean towel and face cloth were hanging on the rail in the bathroom. The bar fridge in the kitchenette had been turned on and smelled of white vinegar. The carpet still held the marks of a recent vacuum and the curtains were new.

In the kitchen cupboard Kevin found a single slice toaster, an electric kettle, one coffee mug, one dinner plate, one bowl and a set of cutlery for one; one teaspoon, one fork, one knife and one soup spoon. It struck him how the flat had been fitted out with a bachelor in mind and he wondered who its previous tenant had been. There were no signs of prior occupation. Whoever had lived there before him hadn't left their mark. Is this the way it would be with him too?

Kevin unpacked his things in the hope of giving the flat some familiarity. He'd brought two cameras, his own typewriter, two reams of blank typing paper and a box of pens, and the rest of his luggage was clothes and books. The clothes fitted into the

wardrobe and chest of drawers with room to spare. He lined his books, mostly novels and reference texts – two dictionaries and a thesaurus – along the top of the wardrobe. If things worked out here, if he stayed, he'd look for a bookshelf, some house plants, a radio with a cassette player and maybe even a television.

Before he'd left, Alexander Bourke had given him a copy of the latest edition of the *Valley Advertiser*.

'Have a look over that when you get a chance. It's a good little read. Will give you an idea of what sort of thing we expect around here,' he said.

Kevin had noted the page one headline, *Fete A Huge Success*.

'Not exactly the Daily Planet, I know, but plenty of good news to keep you busy,' Alexander said.

When he was alone, Kevin thumbed through the pages of the paper. Not that you could really call it a newspaper. It was more like a community newsletter, only eight pages long and most of them filled with gossip columns. And, there were no photographs. That would be the first thing to change, Kevin thought.

The page one story had been written by Alexander Bourke and it reported that a fundraising fete organised by a group calling itself the *Purposeful Widows Brigade*, held in the grounds of the St Agathas church, raised \$423 toward repairs of the church's roof. Beyond that, Kevin found little to amuse him. Councillor Burke, whom he noted was listed as the editor of the paper, had two columns. One, titled 'From the Presidents Pen', was a shamelessly self-gratifying piece on the council's achievements and the good work of the shire president, and the other, called 'Hot Property' was a sales pitch for all of the properties currently on the Bourke Real Estate books.

On the third page was a column devoted to births, deaths and marriages, but the

column was bare. It was the first time in his ten years working as a journalist Kevin had ever seen a large blank space on one of the main pages of a newspaper. The rest of the page was given over to chitchat and hearsay. A woman named Mabel Simpson, whose family ran the newsagency in town, had returned safely from a trip to visit her ailing sister in South Australia, and the town's folk were pleased to see her back. A fellow called Bones Franklin had announced his retirement from the local fire brigade, after 45 years volunteer service, and there was a piece warning motorists to watch their speed on the Monty Street bridge as the surface was prone to a build up of ice in the mornings at this time of year.

The middle pages had a recipe corner, a seven-day weather forecast, and a crossword puzzle. The back three pages were given over to sport. It appeared football was the only thing people played in these parts. Someone named Charlie Hatfield had kicked his 200<sup>th</sup> goal for the season. The coach of the juniors was being cocky about the team's chances come finals time. The ladies auxiliary were outlining their plans to increase the revenue of the weekend canteen by offering hot dogs and buckets of chips along with the usual pies and sausage rolls.

There was one item, buried in the right hand bottom corner of page four, under a small headline, that caught Kevin's eye.

### **NEW REPORTER IN TOWN**

NEXT week will see the arrival of a new reporter in town. His name is Kevin Dwyer and he comes to Baxters Creek from Corriford in the state's east. Mr Dwyer completed his cadetship at the Corriford Gazette where he has been working as a reporter for the past decade.

Helping out in the office will be local girl, Bianca Bourke.

Miss Bourke is the daughter of Alexander and Teresa Bourke from Bourkes Real Estate (see column on page 3).

We wish both Miss Bourke and Mr Dwyer a happy and healthy future together. It was a

gesture probably meant to make him feel welcome, but the air of anticipation in the brief notation made Kevin feel very uneasy. He much preferred to report the news, rather than make it. He slumped onto the bed on his knees, to look out the window.

From the second floor of the newspaper building, he could see most of Monty Street. It was dark out and all the shops were closed, except for the *Emperors Dragon*, which was lit up like a Christmas tree. Tiny red, white and green light bulbs, draped around the shop's window, flashed in sequence and the word OPEN was spelled out inside the window in large electric pink neon letters. Other than that there was no movement along the street. No cars. Not even a breeze.

Kevin could also see over the roof of the Bourkes Real Estate office next door, and across the empty blocks adjoining it, to the house and yard out the back of the old milk bar.

There were no lights on in the house, but a thin line of blue smoke reaching high into the sky from the chimney, was evidence of at least one occupant. The house was an add-on to the milk bar at the front. Really, they were two separate buildings sandwiched together, yet they were united in their decay. The yard at the rear of the house was overgrown with weeds, vegetable garden beds and fruit trees. Around the perimeter of the yard was a flimsy wooden fence propped up by trees limbs and reinforced with scrap metal. It was makeshift but a fortress nonetheless. A tenant, at some time or other, had wanted to keep the yard a secret, or at least keep others out.

Kevin was surprised to see a woman emerge from the back door of the house and stand on the porch overlooking the yard. He switched off the light and reached for his camera. He crouched by the window, resting the camera on the sill, and used the lens like a telescope. In the viewfinder he could see the woman's long wild hair, wide

hips, and slumped shoulders and breasts, outlined in the moonlight. She wasn't quite elderly, Kevin thought, but like the house and the shop, she was well past her prime.

The woman shuffled across the porch to the top of the steps leading down into the yard. Her head was bowed, her fingers were curled into fists, and a small metal bucket was hanging from her elbow. She paused, holding her breath, as if to verify the surrounding silence, then descended into the yard along a path of cracked concrete stepping-stones.

In the centre of the yard she stopped and inhaled, deeply and repeatedly. Either side of her lay large rectangular garden beds filled with herbs and vegetables. Most of the plants stood waist high.

The woman stepped from the path and slowly waded through one of the beds, a hand plucking pods of seeds and dead flowers and depositing them into the bucket as she went. Only her head and shoulders were visible in Kevin's viewfinder. He focused the lens to see if he could pick up more detail, but his finger slipped on the camera's shutter button and the flash went off. Snap. The window in the flat lit up. Kevin dropped to the floor.



The flash of light from the window above the newspaper office blinded Goldie temporarily. She dropped the bucket and scurried up onto the porch and ran back inside the house.

'Bugger, bugger, bugger ...' she said under her breath as she latched the door behind her.

She retreated to the kitchen table and wrote in her notebook.



*July 3, 1973*

*10.13pm*

*I'm being watched again.*

## **- MEMORIAL PARK -**

Travis stepped from his ute and felt the chill in the morning air. He lifted the collar of his shirt to shield his neck and blew warm air onto his fingertips. Memorial Park was dark and empty. Red and brown leaves littered the ground. Everything was still. Travis lifted a wheelbarrow, rake and a pair of work gloves from the tray of his ute. Betty stirred from her bed inside the vehicle, but did not wake. Travis moved quietly, wanting her to stay out of the cold. He put the gloves on, took hold of the wheelbarrow with the rake propped up inside, and set out across the park leaving footprints and a barrow track on the frost covered lawn.

When he reached the centre he stopped to assess his chores. The leaves needed to be removed. The lower branches of the trees needed pruning. Pathways needed a sweep. He had a long couple of days ahead of him. He swung the rake over his shoulder and got to work.

Despite the cold, beads of perspiration formed quickly on his forehead. His shirt stuck to his back. He broke from raking to remove his jacket and wipe sweat from his brow. Out the corner of one eye he spotted a familiar car crossing the bridge. He watched as it turned onto Monty Street.



'Is he tall?' Bianca Bourke said, visibly agitated in the passenger seat of her father's Statesman De Ville.

'I dunno, love,' Alexander said, taking his eyes off the road to give his daughter a wink. 'He's not a midget, if that's what you're worried about.'

'Does he play footy?,' she said.

'I didn't ask.'

Bianca folded her arms and huffed. She stared out the car window, oblivious to the weather.

'You're hopeless, Dad. You haven't told me a thing.'

Alexander could see she was upset.

'I guess you could say that he doesn't look like the kind of bloke who would play footy,' he said.

'What kind of bloke does he look like then?'

Bianca turned back to face her father.

'You'll see for yourself soon enough.'

Bianca unbuckled her seat belt and took lipstick and a small mirror from her bag. Her lips were thick and her eye shadow had smudged. She worked quickly to correct her features, then shook her hair about her shoulders.

'Well he can't be any worse than the corpse we got last time', she said.

Alexander slowed the car as they approached the park.

'Gotta make a quick stop, love,' he said, spotting Travis at work. He swung the vehicle across the road, into the kerb, and tooted his horn.

'Good to see you at it Trav,' he said, calling out through the open driver's window.

'Thanks Mr Bourke,' Travis said, waving his gloves in the air with one hand.

'The front of the old shop could do with a bit of tidying,' Alexander said,

hollering over his revving engine. 'Make that your next job, son.'

'Yes, sir. Will do,' Travis said, giving another wave with the gloves.

He could see Bianca in the passenger seat. She was all done up in a new work outfit. Travis nodded a casual greeting in her direction.

'Hey, Bianca,' he said softly.

She refused to look up at him.

'Come on Dad. I don't wanna be late on the first day,' she said.



Travis watched the Statesman as it rolled further down Monty Street and pulled into one of the parking bays out the front of the newspaper office.

'Mongrels,' he said under his breath.

He marched back to the centre of the park, kicked up the piles of leaves with his feet, and then sat at the base of a tree to roll and smoke a cigarette.

## **- THE ADVERTISER -**

Kevin took himself on a tour of the downstairs offices instead of venturing out for breakfast. On the ground floor he found the front door led into a small foyer reminiscent of a doctor's surgery. There were two large armchairs and a small side table just inside the door and a hardwood counter with a potted palm at each end. Beyond the counter was a medium sized office space with a desk, a bank of filing cabinets and a wall of shelving. This was the area for administration and customer service. It was very open. Kevin was relieved to find, off to one side, a separate office with a door, which had a sign, Editorial, on it. His office had a large window facing on to Monty Street but hanging in the window was a set of thick white aluminium blinds. A desk sat in front of the window. It would be the perfect place for spying, and for getting some writing done. The flat upstairs wasn't much, but it was worth coming just for the office, Kevin thought.

Out the back there was a darkroom for developing film, but it was the size of a broom closet. The staffroom next door was also tiny. Its walls were lined with boxes of old newspapers. Archives, Kevin assumed. There were none of the modern typewriters, filing systems or layout facilities, but it had an intimate, small country town charm that Kevin could appreciate. He was keen to get down to business.

He walked to the window in his office. Peering out he saw Councillor Bourke's Statesman pull up out the front. He watched as Alexander emerged from the driver's door and a young woman emerged from another. He took a deep breath and went to

greet them.



‘Morning Kevin,’ Alexander said, his voice booming across the foyer. ‘Settling in well are we?’

‘Getting there, Mr Bourke.’

‘I’d like to introduce you to my daughter, Bianca. She’s head of advertising and administration.’

‘Hello Mr Dwyer,’ Bianca said, dipping her head.

‘Miss Bourke. Very nice to meet you,’ he said, shaking her hand awkwardly.

Kevin had to work hard to disguise his alarm. He wondered what work experience the girl had and what qualifications she might have met. He doubted she had been in the newspaper business long. Her skirt was too short, and she had garish painted nails. She looked more like a hairdresser than an office worker.

‘I’ll leave you two to get acquainted,’ Alexander said.

He grabbed Kevin’s shoulder on his way out and whispered in his ear, ‘Take good care of her for me, Dwyer.’

Bianca waited until her father had gone.

‘I thought you’d be taller,’ she said, putting her hands on her hip as she looked Kevin up and down.

‘Shall we get started?,’ Kevin said.

He wasn’t much to look at, but there was something Bianca liked about his clean

face and combed hair. He was soft and weedy. The *indoor* type. Too tidy and serious in that navy blue suit. She could win him over easily.

‘Sure,’ she said, leading Kevin behind the counter to the stationery cupboard.



When Alexander arrived at the estate agency he found the office was already open for business. He could see the top of his wife’s head through the window, her hair tied up tightly in the shape of a dinner roll resting at the centre of her scalp.

‘Morning love,’ he said cheerily as he marched through the door to his desk.

Teresa Bourke checked the watch on her wrist and offered her husband a frown . Her sharp features, grey blazer and milk coloured blouse made her look like Margaret Thatcher. She continued to talk into the phone pressed firmly against her ear.

‘Do you understand what I’m trying to say? Do you need me to speak more slowly?’ she said to the caller in a tone of voice that indicated she had already lost her patience.

‘Nothing can be done until you sign the new lease agreement,’ she said.

Alexander bent over to drop his briefcase on the floor and noticed his fly was undone.

‘All right? You understand that?’ Teresa said sharply down the phone. ‘I’ll send my husband over to collect the papers this afternoon and he can take a look at the pipes then. Good-bye.’

Teresa slammed the phone down and huffed.

'That bloody Fontaine woman,' she said. 'Doesn't understand a single word you say to her.'

She swivelled in her seat and caught her husband yanking at the zipper on his trousers.

'I left the front door open this morning,' Alexander said, sticking his thumb through the opening, from the inside of his pants.

'Put that away,' Teresa said.

Alexander obeyed and sat down at his desk with his fly still open.

'You'll have to go over to the *Emperors Dragon* again,' Teresa said. 'Lynne Fontaine needs some help with her English.'

'Bloody hell,' Alexander said, placing a hand on his open zipper and reaching in to adjust himself. 'As if I haven't got enough to do.'

Teresa offered him what was as close to a smile as she could muster and got up to attend to the alphabetising of client folders at the filing cabinet.



Lynne Fontaine was in the kitchen at the *Emperors Dragon* cursing in Cantonese. She couldn't find the right words in English to express how she felt about Teresa Bourke.

She returned to a chopping board on the sink and shredded a whole head of lettuce vigorously. Then she resumed the preparation of pork dumplings, wrapping balls of tender pink flesh into rice paper skins. She found food preparation useful for alleviating her frustration.

A small statue of Buddha, laden with smoking incense sticks and oranges, stared



down at her from a shelf above her head.

'It not meant to be like this,' she said to the deity.

When there was no reply, she took two of the dumplings in the palm of her hand and rolled them together. They reminded her of Alexander's testicles.

## - A FORMIDABLE SIGHT -

Kevin had just sat down at his desk when a rapping on his door startled him.

‘Sorry to bother you,’ Bianca said, poking her head into the room. ‘Just wondering what you are doing for lunch today?’

Her body came slinking through the doorway.

‘I’m not very hungry actually, Bianca,’ Kevin said, standing to meet her eyes. ‘I think I’ll work through.’

‘It’s not healthy to stay cooped up in here,’ Bianca said. ‘You can grab something to eat with me if you like’.

She locked her arms behind her back.

‘I don’t bite.’

‘Maybe another day,’ Kevin said.

‘It’s a date.’

Bianca turned to leave and revealed a split in the rear of her skirt that went all the way up to her bum.

Kevin twisted in his chair and, through the office window, saw the man from the pub negotiating the cellar on the footpath across the road.



Jack Diamond was steady on his feet, considering he only had one real leg. He hobbled to the edge of the cellar near the main entrance to the pub and bent down to

unlock and open the wooden doors. He arranged himself on hands and knees and backed his way onto the ladder and down into the underground vault. At the bottom he switched on a light. The cellar was cold and smelled like the urinals in the men's toilet located at the back of the bar upstairs. Jack blocked his nose and began counting the dented aluminium beer barrels lining the cellar's damp walls.

Half way through counting he heard voices and footsteps approaching the cellar door. One of the voices was hostile and sharp. The other was hoarse from stuttering. Jack abandoned his stock take, hoisted himself back up the ladder and reared his head up through the opening in the footpath just in time to catch the eyes of the two passing elderly women.

'Morning ladies,' he said.

'Mr Diamond. Please. You scared the living daylights out of us,' Pat Thompson said, holding a hand across her chest.

She was a formidable sight. A tall, slender woman with long, solid legs, she was dressed in black from head to toe. A heavy woollen dress, leather handbag, shoes and stockings were complimented by a black crepe hat with a fine net veil, which covered the top half of her face. Her thin silver hair was pinned tightly to her scalp. She was in a permanent state of mourning.

'You must not do that again,' she said.

'N-n-no Mr D-d-diamond. Never do that a-a-again,' Nancy Kilpatrick said, seconding the motion.

Nancy was half Pat's height, but twice her width. Her hips and breasts were growing horizontally and pushed out at the seams of her navy skirt and blazer. She had plump, round cheeks and a red nose. Twitching nervously in the shadow of her friend,

she looked like the assistant to a funeral director.

‘Sorry ladies,’ Jack said, pulling himself up onto the pavement. ‘Not my intention to alarm you.’

‘Mr Diamond’, Pat said, stepping forward and interrupting him. ‘We’re in a bit of a hurry. Come on Nancy.’

She grabbed Nancy by the elbow and led her away.

Jack watched them waddle down the street arm in arm.



When they had vanished from his view, Jack positioned himself to descend into the cellar again and saw, out the corner of his eye, the new bloke at the newspaper staring at him from his window across the road. He nodded at the reporter who quickly disappeared into the shadows of his office.

## **- PWB FOR SHORT -**

‘Morning Mabel,’ Pat said, entering the newsagents with Nancy following close behind. ‘Any news?’

Mabel Simpson was considerably younger than both Pat and Nancy and her appearance was more colourful. She wore a bright yellow and green patterned woollen jumper with a red skirt and had a small bouquet of native flowers pinned to her chest. A pair of lime green framed glasses were poised on the end of her nose. In contrast to the other women, her personality was as cheerful as her wardrobe.

‘I haven’t heard anymore from the Peddley farm...,’ Mabel said, her hands spread out on the counter in front of her.

‘...only that Doctor Gibbons is due out there this morning. I suspect things aren’t looking too good.’

Pat took a deep breath, her nostrils flaring, and looked to Nancy.

‘I think a sympathy card and a bunch of flowers might be in order’, she said.

‘Y-y-yes Pat,’ Nancy replied. ‘I’ll get straight onto it’.

Nancy proceeded further into the shop to scan the row of gift cards on the back wall. She took the orders Pat gave her very seriously.

‘The new guy at the newspaper has arrived,’ Mabel said, suddenly remembering. ‘Got in last night.’

‘About time,’ Pat said. ‘What’s he like?’

‘I haven’t laid eyes on him yet, but I hear he doesn’t have a wife.’

‘Come, Nancy,’ Pat said. ‘We’ll finalise the card later. We have some business to

attend to at the *Advertiser*.'



Lynne Fontaine stepped onto the footpath out the front of the *Emperors Dragon*. She wore a short, sleeveless red silk dress with a fire-breathing dragon embroidered on the hem, and a pair of matching high heel shoes. Her long black hair extended well beyond her narrow waist. She had painted fingernails, and almond shaped eyes. She was petite.

In one hand she held a can of paint, in the other a brush. She tilted her head from side to side whilst studying the restaurant window and then quickly got to work.

Her strokes were swift but steady. The paint matched the blood-red of her dress and shoes. On one line she wrote, 'Lunch Time Special'. Underneath, in a bolder font, she painted the price, '\$4.50'.

She stepped back toward the kerb to review her lettering and saw Pat and Nancy cross the road and enter the newspaper office.



'Nice to see you at work Bianca,' Pat said, stepping into the *Advertiser* foyer with Nancy following at her heels.

'Mrs Thompson. Mrs Kilpatrick. How are you both?'

Pat placed her handbag on the counter and waited for Nancy to stand still at her side.

'We'd like to met the new reporter. What's his name?'

'Dwyer. Kevin Dwyer.'

Pat reached out and grabbed hold of Bianca's wrist.

'There's no Mrs Dwyer?' she said.

'I don't think so,' Bianca said with a smirk. 'Dad wasn't sure, but he turned up yesterday by himself and there's no wedding band on his finger.'

'Good for us to have another eligible bachelor in town,' Pat said raising her eyebrows.

'F-f-fingers crossed, love,' Nancy said, joining in on the conspiracy.

Bianca bit her lip and nodded.

'I'll just get him for you.'



Kevin offered his hand to Pat and Nancy as they entered his office, but neither accepted the gesture.

'Welcome to town Mr Dwyer,' Pat said coolly, making note of his tidy appearance.

'H-h-hello,' Nancy added, stumbling over her greeting.

'Take a seat, please,' Kevin said, waving them to the chairs in front of his desk.

The women sat. Kevin made his way to his seat, anticipating an interrogation.

'What can I do for you?'

Pat sat forward in her chair and clutched at the bag on her lap. She resembled a vulture perched above unsuspecting prey.

'Mrs Kilpatrick and I are the office bearers of the town's leading charitable organisation, the *Purposeful Widows Brigade*.'

'The PWB, f-f-for short,' Nancy said.

'We just wanted to ensure that we continue to get the same standard of editorial support that we have had in the past,' Pat said.

'I'm here to help in any way I can,' Kevin said.

Pat seemed comforted by his words and sat back in her chair.

'Is there a Mrs Dwyer?' she said, the veil on her hat masking the changing expression on her face.

'Only my mother,' Kevin said. He hoped the conversation would return to more newsworthy matters.

'And where is it you are from again?,' Pat said.

'Corriford,' Kevin said.

'Big ch-ch-change for you,' Nancy said.

Both Kevin and Pat turned to look at her. There was a moment of silence between all three of them. Kevin did not want the conversation to become any more personal. Pat was formulating ways to garner more information from the meeting. Nancy was mesmerised by the reporter's soft blue eyes.

'I'd love to hear about your group's activities and discuss ways I can help keep the wider community abreast of them, but I'm a little busy at the moment. Perhaps you'd like to make an appointment,' Kevin said.

He stood and made his way towards the door. Pat and Nancy watched him as he crossed the room and then rose from their seats, both stunned by the suddenness of his actions. They waved to Bianca as they passed through the foyer and onto the street.





On the footpath outside the bank, Pat leaned to Nancy and whispered into her ear.

‘There’s something about that man. Best we keep an eye on him.’

Nancy agreed, but she really had no idea what Pat was worried about.

## **- DR GIBBONS' DIAGNOSIS -**

Mary stood at the back door of the farmhouse and listened carefully as Dr Gibbons confirmed his original diagnosis and outlined the treatment. The cancer had spread vigorously, he told her, and there were numerous tumours forming around the brain. If he were to have any chance, Donald would have to go to one of the city hospitals for treatment. He would be there for many months. They would need money to cover the cost of surgery and all the medication. All this, and there was no guarantee Donald would actually get better.

'Thanks for coming to see him again, doctor,' Mary said, her head bowed.

Dr Gibbons put his hand on her shoulder.

'I'm sorry I can't give you better news.'

Mary watched him get into his car and disappear down the driveway, wishing she could follow.

When Donald had first become ill, Mary had expected he would be back on his feet within days. In all the time she had known him, he had only ever been sick twice; once on their honeymoon and once when Ginny died. Both times he'd lost his appetite and refused to get out of bed. This third time Mary had let him rest on the lounge for a few days and encouraged him to get back on his feet by making soup and feeding him aspirin. It took a week for Donald to resume the milking of the cows and he had none of his usual strength when he did. A few days after that Mary, having tired of waiting for him to come up to the house for lunch, had gone down to the sheds and found Donald

collapsed on the ground vomiting up blood.

Things had quickly gone downhill since then. It had been difficult finding anyone to take over the management of the farm and the cattle had quickly become restless. Mary noted how the animals pined for her husband and the routines he had imposed upon them. Before dawn they waited in herds by the gate to be lead to the sheds for milking. They bellowed for better grazing well into the night and kept Mary awake with worry.

She went inside to use the phone.

'Hello Bourke Real Estate.'

Teresa's voice at the other end of the line was coarse in Mary's ear.

'Hello. This is Mary Peddley.'

'Mary. What can I do for you?'

'I was wondering if Alexander was available.'

'No, sorry. Is there something I can help you with?'

'I just...'

Mary trailed off. The thought of having to sell the farm to cover Donald's medical expenses suddenly engulfed her. She hung up.



At the other end of the line Teresa scribbled a message to her husband in thick red letters. It read: 'Mary Peddley called. Urgent.'



## - SALTY PORK WANTONS -

Alexander parted the beads hanging in the doorway separating the *Emperors Dragon* dining area from its kitchen.

'What's the problem?' he said, spying Lynne bent over with her head and shoulders submerged in the deep freeze.

Lynne pretended not to hear him and continued rummaging through the packages of frozen meat.

'Sweetheart. Talk to me,' Alexander said.

He strolled over to the freezer and grabbed Lynne around the waist, lifting her into the air and turning her face to his.

'I can't fix anything if you don't tell me what's wrong,' he said.

Lynne looked up into his swollen face and frowned at him.

'Your wife. She not like me. She know something going on.'

'Nonsense sweetheart,' Alexander said. 'She doesn't suspect a thing.'

Lynne was not comforted and forced herself out of his grip. Alexander pursued and caught up with her at the sink, his stomach pressing into her back. He wrapped his arms around her tiny frame and put his head on her shoulder.

'Don't worry,' he said, whispering in her ear. 'I'll take care of you.'

Lynne let him nibble on her neck. She loved the stubble on his chin tickling her skin.

'You hungry?' she said, turning to meet his lips with hers.

'I'm always hungry,' he said, lifting her onto the sink.

Lynne reached for one of the cooked pork wantons at her side and deposited it into Alexander's mouth. His cheeks swelled with warm salty meat and soft, wet skin. He pulled her close to him and rubbed his erection against her crotch.



'There's no sign of a wife,' Pat announced, leading Nancy into the estate office by the wrist.

Teresa got up from her desk to greet them.

'What's he like?' she said.

'He seems pretty straight up and down, but he's got dishonest eyes,' Pat said.

'Are he and Bianca getting along?' Teresa said

'S-s-she seemed quite taken by him,' Nancy said.

Teresa was pleased with the report and remembered she had news of her own.

'I've just had a call from the Peddley farm. Mary wants to talk to Alexander.'

Pat took a deep breath and froze.

'That's a bad sign,' she said. 'A visit is in order.'

Nancy had wandered off during the exchange and stood looking out the estate office door. She'd noticed the freshly painted letters on the *Emperors Dragon* window across the street.

'W-w-what's that all about?' she said.

Teresa and Pat joined her at the door.

'She doesn't have permission to do that,' Teresa said.

'I hope Alexander is having a word to her about it,' Pat said, shaking her head.



## - NOCTURNAL OBSERVATIONS -

Travis held open the front door of the pub and waited until Betty had climbed the steps before following her inside.

Jack saw them enter and called out from the back bar.

'What are you two doing here?'

'Thought you might like a hand cleaning up,' Travis said.

'And thought you might like to clean up a few while you are at it, hey?'

Travis smiled and took a seat on a stool at the bar. He watched Jack put a glass to the beer tap. Ale poured out like cream.

'Barrel dregs. Might be a bit frothy,' Jack said.

'No worries,' Travis said.

It wasn't the beer he was after.

The two men sat opposite one another as they drank. Despite the absence of any genetic connection, they looked like father and son. Jack had once had Travis' lean, toned physique and soft brown curls. They were of a similar height and had the same dark eyes, slender nose and chiselled cheeks. They even sat with the same posture, their legs spread wide and backs held straight. It was in conversation though, that they appeared closest.

'I was out at the Peddley place yesterday,' Travis said.

Jack looked into his beer.

'How' is she?' he said, not looking up.



'No good,' Travis said, staring into his drink.

Betty, curled up at his feet, rolled on to her side and farted.



Kevin had spent the entire day confined to his office, trying to make sense of the newspaper layout and the looming deadline. Alexander had given him and Bianca two weeks to fill 12 pages.

'A bumper issue to kick start a new chapter in the life of the *Advertiser*,' he said.

Kevin was glad to have the challenge. Nothing made him feel settled more than a heavy work load and the pressures of publication, so the lack of interruptions was a blessing.

Excluding Bianca's regular intrusions and the visit from Mrs Thompson and Mrs Kilpatrick, the only other person he'd come across was Teresa Bourke. She'd popped in to collect her daughter at the end of the day and to introduce herself.

Bianca had knocked on his door and ushered her mother in as if she were the proud new owner of a puppy.

'This is him, Mum,' she said.

'Pleasure to meet you Mrs Bourke', Kevin said.

Teresa had stood there measuring him up, from head to foot and back again, before saying anything.

'I've heard a lot about you Mr Dwyer,' she said.

Kevin had been surprised by her appearance. He'd expected her to be rough and vulgar, like her husband and daughter, but she was quite the opposite. She was dressed like a politician's wife or a school governess in a serious, drab skirt and jacket. She wore

no makeup except a light foundation powder, which made her face too white and her skin look cold and bloodless. Unlike Bianca, she was flat chested.

‘You’ll have to come out to the house some time,’ Teresa said. ‘Bianca and I can prepare you a nice home cooked meal.’

‘That’d be nice,’ Kevin said, trying to mask his uncertainty.

It was dark now and Kevin was feeling tired. In front of him lay a pile of entries for the community diary section of the paper. The PWB were to hold a raffle outside the news agency Saturday week. The regional mobile library would be in town for a whole day at the end of the month. The chef at the *Emperors Dragon* was offering free Chinese cooking classes. Kevin rubbed his eyes. This work would have to wait until the morning. As he got up from his desk, the phone rang. It hadn’t done that all day.

He lifted the receiver and spoke quietly.

‘Hello. The *Valley Advertiser*. Kevin Dwyer speaking.’

There was nothing but silence from the other end of the line.

‘Hello. Can I help you?’

Again, no response from the caller.

‘The office is closed. You’ll have to call back during office hours,’ Kevin said.

As he moved to place the receiver down he heard stifled breathing. The caller was sobbing. He listened for a moment and softened his tone.

‘Who is this?’

Before he could ask anything else, the person at the other end of the line hung up.

The receiver crackled in Kevin’s ear.

Upstairs Kevin moved about the flat in darkness. He poured himself a glass of water and went to stand by the window above his bed. Baxters Creek by night, again. But this time the lights out the front of the *Emperors Dragon* were off. No chance of takeaway tonight.

The yard out the back of the milk bar was quiet too. No sign of the woman with the bucket. No smoke coming from the chimney. I've scared her off, Kevin thought. And, as much as he wanted to keep watch, in the hope that the woman would reappear, he was falling asleep on his feet. He took off his jacket, laid down on the bed and, as he dozed off, reminded himself to develop the film in his camera.



Goldie waited until 3am before she ventured out onto her back porch. This time she wore a broad brimmed straw hat on her head, which cast a heavy shadow over her face and shoulders. She plodded down the steps and made her way to the back of her yard, concealing her movements by weaving through the shrubs along the fence. She wasn't taking chances with the snoop at the *Advertiser*.

Out of the yard Goldie made her way on to Monty Street. She hid under the awning out the front of the milk bar and checked for traffic, and when she was certain there was none, she crossed the street and slipped quietly down the side of the *Emperors Dragon*.

A light from the restaurant's kitchen came on and a young Chinese woman appeared at the window. Goldie squatted in the grass and watched.

Lynne stood with a hand either side of the sink and tried to regulate her breathing. She'd woken feeling queasy and the impulse to be sick had forced her out of bed. Her stomach was bloated with the ingredients of her dinner. Egg noodles, fried onions, salty pork and oyster sauce. Her throat was dry.

She convulsed forward and retched, but nothing came out. She gagged, and coughed, and spat saliva into the sink, then rinsed her mouth with water from the tap.

When she recovered she stared out the window, cold and numb in her red silk nightdress.

Goldie remained low in the grass, making a diagnosis of the woman's discomfort. She recognised the symptoms. She even recalled the times when she had felt much the same way.

When the kitchen light went out Goldie resumed her course. She wove a path around the back of the butcher shop and the bakery and hid in the shadows at the rear of the pub.

Jack was sitting on the back steps, smoking a cigarette and rubbing the thigh of his amputated leg.

Goldie scrutinised his movements.

Jack took a final drag of his smoke and tossed the butt onto the lawn. He yawned, stretched his arms into the air, then pulled himself up and hopped inside.

When all the lights on the ground floor were off, Goldie crept across the lawn and up onto the steps. She took two scrunched up ten dollar notes from a pocket in her dress and wedged them under the mat at the back door and, in exchange, retrieved a

newspaper parcel left to one side of a bin. She retreated across the lawn with the parcel in her arms and disappeared into Memorial Park.

## - A GOOD TEAM -

Alexander sat at his desk drumming his fat fingers.

'Must you do that?' Teresa said.

She was sitting opposite him waiting to take notes.

'It helps me think,' he said.

He leaned forward and flicked open the file in front of him. Inside lay town plans.

On paper Monty Street had undergone a transformation. The entire bottom half of the right hand side of the street, from the real estate office down past the old milk bar, had been converted into a multi-level shopping complex with a hundred car parking spaces, a dozen retail shops and a large supermarket.

'How about this?' Alexander said. '*The Plaza.*'

Teresa scribbled the idea on paper and then stopped to consider it.

'Sounds too foreign. People will want to know what it means,' she said.

'What about ... *The Village Square,*' Alexander said.

Teresa ran it over in her mind before committing it to paper. She still wasn't convinced.

'I like arcade. Can't we work arcade into it?'

Alexander pushed back in his chair and looked beaten. Teresa mumbled to herself.

'Arcade. The arcade. The Bourke Arcade. The Alexander Jefferson Bourke Arcade.'

'What?' Alexander said, sitting up.

Teresa jotted the title on the page in front of her and held it up for him to read.

'The AJ Bourke Arcade. I like it,' he said.

Alexander got up from his seat and gave Teresa a kiss.

She felt his wet, warm lips on her cheek.

'Still make a good team you and me,' he said.

Teresa returned to her own desk to type up her notes. When Alexander wasn't looking, she wiped his kiss from her face with the back of her hand.



'I've been single for ages,' Bianca said, leaning over the table in the *Advertiser* staff room to hand Kevin one of her homemade shortbread biscuits.

Kevin took a biscuit from the plate and sniffed it. Bianca watched him.

'What about you?' she asked.

'Same,' Kevin said flatly.

He bit into the shortbread and retreated to his office.

Bianca followed with the plate of biscuits.

'Have another. I made them myself', she said.

'One is ample.'

'Didn't you like it?'

'It was fine. I'm just not much of a sweet tooth.'

Bianca placed the plate on the desk and sat down opposite him. She flicked her hair across one shoulder. Kevin could smell her perfume.

'What are you doing on the weekend?' she asked.

Kevin glanced down at the remainder of his shortbread and saw white flakes mixed in with the flour, sugar and butter.

'Did you put coconut in this?'

'Just a bit,' Bianca said, holding fingers up to illustrate the quantity.

'I'm allergic to it,' Kevin said, rushing out of the office.

Bianca followed him to the staff toilet door and listened as Kevin coughed violently and spat flakes of coconut from his mouth.



Betty sat amongst the weeds popping up through the footpath out the front of the old milk bar and watched Travis work. Shirtless, he took a pair of shears to the vines strangling the verandah posts and begun cutting vigorously. But, he was distracted by the reflection of his naked torso in the shop's window. He paused for a moment to note the contours of his arms. Bianca had been a fan of his biceps, he recalled.

'They're like mini footballs,' she told him the first night they met on the bank of the creek at the back of Memorial Park.

'I like a man who keeps himself in shape,' she said, pressing her chest against his.

Travis held her hand and played with the hair dangling around her ears.

'I could fall in love with you,' he told her.

She laughed and kissed him. She had something else in mind.

On their second meeting they went skinny dipping, and Bianca wrapped herself in Travis' arms in the water, clutching onto his biceps to keep herself afloat. Her breasts bobbed under the surface.



‘They’re like mini footballs too,’ Bianca said, guiding Travis’ hands to her nipples.

However, for the duration of their third date Travis’ muscles remained fully clothed.

‘I can’t see you anymore,’ Bianca had told him.

‘Why?’

Travis fumbled around in his pocket for the ring he had intended as a gift. It had belonged to his mother.

‘I’m looking for someone special Travis,’ she said.

Travis tried to hold her in his arms, but she broke away and left him alone in the park.

Betty barked and when Travis looked up he saw a bloke emerge from the newspaper office up the street. Not that he looked like much of a bloke in the true sense of the word. Too clean cut. Bit of a sissy. Looked like he was carrying a handbag over his shoulder. Must be the new reporter, Travis thought. He watched as the man crossed Monty Street and entered the *Emperors Dragon*.

## **- BUSINESSMAN'S BANQUET -**

Lynne heard the bell on the restaurant door and rushed into the dining room. A skinny man in a suit stood in front of her. He had a bag over one shoulder. She clasped her hands at her chest and bowed her head to him.

'Welcome,' she said. 'Table for one?'

Kevin noted the woman spoke with an accent and had the facial features of a doll. He felt obliged to bow back.

'Yes. What's the special?' he said.

'Businessman Banquet. You hungry?'

Lynne grabbed a menu and led him to one of the tables by the window.

Kevin watched her as she walked. Her hair swung about her hips. She was delicate, but he detected a hint of the wilfulness and determination often found in people of her stature.

'For entree, Chicken and Sweet Corn Soup with prawn cracker,' Lynne said, helping him sit. She opened the menu on the table and pointed to a list. 'For main course, you choose one from here.'

Kevin scanned the list. Pork Wonton with Soup Noodle. Chicken in Batter with either a lemon or sweet and sour sauce. Satay Beef with Cashew Nuts.

'I'm allergic to nuts, so I can't have the Satay,' Kevin said. 'I'm also allergic to peas and coconut.'

'I cut out.'

Kevin ordered the soup and crackers and a main course serving of the Beef in

Black Bean Sauce with a small bowl of Special Fried Rice.

'I cook now,' Lynne said.

She offered to take the bag on his lap.

'Is it okay if I take a few snaps?' he said, opening the bag to reveal a camera.

'No problem,' she said before disappearing out the back to the kitchen.

Kevin glanced around at the setting and was impressed. It was like a little piece of Chinatown on the main street of Baxters Creek. The decor was immaculate. Six large white moon-shaped lanterns hung from the ceiling, each with a large red dragon painted around its girth. On one wall hung assorted paper fans and a silk screen depicting the scene of an oriental woman sitting in a boat, holding an umbrella over her face. Along the length of the other wall stood a giant plaster sculpture of a golden dragon, with ribbons of fire flaming from its mouth. There were wooden chopsticks, folded napkins and small ceramic canisters of soy sauce and chilli paste laid out on the white tablecloths. There were pots of bamboo either side of the entrance. It was an exotic interior done tastefully. Kevin was looking forward to his meal.

He sat more comfortably in his seat and stared out the restaurant window. Across the street a shirtless man was wrestling with the vines on the old milk bar's shopfront awning. The man's chest was hairless and glistened with sweat. His curly hair was stuck to his brow and neck. He yanked the vines fiercely and they came away from the shop in his fists. There was a tired looking dog resting at his feet.

Kevin put the camera up to the window and took their photo.

The sight of Bianca leaving the *Advertiser* office distracted him. She locked the front door behind her, and wandered down the street.



'You look nice,' Travis called out as Bianca passed her parent's estate office.

Bianca continued down the street towards him.

'G'Day Betty,' she said, nudging the dog with her foot.

'Got a new feller at the office I see,' Travis said mopping the sweat from his neck with a crumpled singlet.

'Yep,' Bianca replied. 'He's really nice'.

She put a hand on her hip and smoothed her hair behind one ear.

'He's already asked me out.'

'You joining him across the road?' Travis asked.

Bianca looked over at the *Emperors Dragon* and saw Kevin in the window.

'I've got to get back to work,' she said. She stormed off up the street.

'See you,' Travis called after her.

Travis looked to Betty who had sniffed her way along the front of the milk bar and was clawing at the door with her front paws.

'Leave it.'

Betty backed away and barked at him.

'Its none of your business,' he said.

The dog wandered to his feet and sat. She looked up at him as if expecting further explanation.

'Leave the old duck to herself.'

He resumed his work.



'Chicken and Sweet Corn Soup,' Lynne announced, delivering a bowl to Kevin's table.

'You new here?' she asked as he picked up his spoon.

'Yes. I've taken up the post as the reporter on the local paper.'

'I new too,' Lynne said.

She pulled out the chair opposite and sat down. She wore a serious expression on her face.

'How long have you been here?' Kevin asked.

'Two months and two days. You my first customer.'

Kevin looked into her moist brown eyes.

'What brought you here?' he asked.

She looked away from him.

'What brought you here?' she asked in return.

Neither of them answered.



Goldie was woken by the sound of voices out the front of the shop. She crept through the house to the door joining the shop to her kitchen and cocked her head to listen. She heard the muffled sounds of a young man's voice and the barking of a dog. She took a seat.

On the table in front of her sat the newspaper parcel she'd retrieved from the rear

of the pub. She pulled it onto her lap and unwrapped it. Inside were three items; a small bottle of whisky, a pouch of tobacco and a packet of papers for rolling cigarettes. Goldie went to the collection of records in her lounge room and put one on the gramophone. She returned to the kitchen and poured herself a drink.



Just metres away, Travis stopped his pruning. He could hear music.

He turned to Betty.

'Is that jazz?'

## **- GIVE THE MAN SOME TIME -**

'I didn't know you liked Chinese food', Bianca said, placing a file on Kevin's desk. 'How was it?'

Kevin could see she was upset.

The food had been excellent. The soup was hot and salty. The prawn crackers blistered on his lips. The tender slices of beef melted on his tongue. There were spring onions, scrambled eggs and diced pork in the fried rice. Kevin thought it best not to go into details.

'It was fine.'

Bianca stood there waiting for him to elaborate.

'I noticed you stepped out briefly', Kevin said. 'I thought we'd agreed one staff member would be on site at all times.'

Bianca retreated to the office door.

'I wasn't gone for very long.'

'Who was the man you were talking to?' Kevin asked before she could leave the room.

'Travis Handley. An ex-boyfriend. He's still keen on me.'

Bianca shut the door behind her and returned to her desk.



When Alexander entered the newspaper office Bianca rushed to him.

'He doesn't like me Dad,' she said.

'Give the man some time, love.'

'He had lunch with that Fontaine woman today,' Bianca said.

Alexander marched into Kevin's office and stood over the reporter.

'Have a nice lunch, did we?' he asked.

'Yes, I did,' Kevin said, surprised by the interruption. 'Miss Fontaine's quite a chef.'

'Let's get one thing clear right from the start,' Alexander said firmly. 'The *Emperors Dragon* is none of your business.'

'Sure.' Kevin said, backing away.

Alexander took a seat back on the other side of the desk and calmed himself.

'Thought I should drop in and turn over a few matters.'

Kevin eased himself back into his chair and listened.

'You might have heard some rumours about plans the Council has for a range of improvements to the infrastructure of the town, and I want you to keep them under your hat,' Alexander said.

'What sort of improvements,' Kevin asked.

'Too early for details, but when it's all finalised you'll be the first to know. For the time being though, keep your nose out of it.'

Kevin frowned. He didn't like being warned off good story leads.

'Seriously Dwyer,' Alexander said, leaning forward in his seat. 'It stays off the record.'

Kevin nodded reluctantly.



Alexander hauled himself up out of his seat. At the door he turned and straightened his tie.

‘Speaks highly of you my Bianca does,’ he said. ‘Join me and the family for dinner at the pub Friday night.’

Kevin waited until Alexander had left before scribbling on a notepad:

*Township improvements. Make some enquiries.*

## - TOO LATE -

Goldie sat on the floor in her dimly lit lounge room surrounded by a sea of black and white photographs. The Charlie Parker record playing on the gramophone gave the room warmth, as did the half bottle of the whisky Goldie had consumed.

In her hands she held a photo of a baby, an infant boy with a quiff of soft feathery golden hair and large dark eyes. He was wrapped in a white cotton sheet in a cot filled with cushions and woollen blankets. He looked like an angel floating on a cloud.

Next to the child in the cot was a soft toy bird. A duck. Or was it a goose? Goldie had never been able to tell.

She rang a finger over the photograph.

The needle on the gramophone jumped from the record and the room suddenly fell silent. There was a sudden chill in the air. Goldie sobered. She put the photograph in her pocket and listened to the wind picking up outside.



Mary sat on the bed next to Donald and stared across the cold, dim room. A breeze blew through the open window, disturbing the curtains. In the distance, the cows were bellowing and farm dogs were howling at the moon.

Donald's body was limp and his eyes were open. Mary let go of his hand and turned away. It was over.

His passing had been slow. He had gasped and wheezed his way through the night, drifting in and out of consciousness and calling out in pain.

Mary had phoned Dr Gibbons to ask for advice.

‘At this stage of the game there isn’t much we can do,’ he told her, offering to call by the following morning.

‘Just keep him comfortable and say your good byes.’

Mary had brought Donald lemonade and painkillers but had refrained from uttering a farewell. She couldn’t bring herself to say the things she thought she ought to. She didn’t know where to start.

It had come as a surprise then when, only moments before his breathing stopped for the final time, Donald opened his eyes and motioned for her to come closer.

‘What is it darling?’

She put her ear to his mouth.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘I know’.

Mary had been puzzled and sat back on the edge of the bed.

‘Know what?’ she asked him, but it was too late.

## **- PERFECT FLORAL TRIBUTE -**

Pat Thompson peered out her kitchen window and saw a cat sniffing at the roses down her side fence.

‘Shoo,’ she said, tapping on the window with her white knuckles.

The cat skipped across the garden and disappeared into the neighbour’s yard.

Pat took her gardening gloves and a small pair of pruning shears and headed out onto her front lawn.

In the centre of the garden stood a crown of Arum Lilies with large white flowers poking up through lush green foliage. They would make the perfect floral tribute, Pat thought to herself.

The news had come through the usual channels. Dr Gibbons’ receptionist, Bernadette Cornish, had overheard her employer on the phone. She called Mabel at the newsagents and Mabel, in turn, had taken it upon herself to inform Pat.

‘I thought you’d want to know as soon as possible,’ she said when Pat answered the phone just after breakfast.

Pat then called Nancy.

‘Come over immediately,’ she ordered. ‘The Lord took Donald Peddley last night.’

Nancy had burst into tears on the other end of the line.

‘Pull yourself together Nancy,’ Pat demanded. ‘We’ve got a lot of work to do.’

Pat had just finished writing in the sympathy card when Nancy rang her

doorbell.

‘P-p-pat,’ Nancy called out. ‘Are y-y-you there?’

Pat let her in and closed the screen door behind her.

‘First we’ll head out to the farm with the flowers and card,’ Pat said, clipping a earring to a lobe. ‘Then we’ll come back into town to get things arranged up at the church. I don’t want Mary to have to worry about any of the small details. She’ll need time to embrace her loss.’

Nancy watched Pat, in awe of her height and stamina. She was a strong, determined woman, but never more so than when she had a funeral to organise. Nancy recalled what it had been like when her own husband, Frank, had died almost a year ago. Pat had been a tower of strength and was right beside her through everything. She’d organised the casket, the burial service, the procession up the main street and played hostess at the wake out at Nancy and Frank’s house. She’d arranged all the flowers in the church and wrote up the obituary and funeral notices to be printed in the *Advertiser*. She even wrote Nancy’s eulogy and held Nancy around the waist as she delivered it from the pulpit. She was an expert at grieving.

Pat’s husband, Brian, had died well over a decade ago and Pat had never recovered from the loss. They’d had a son, Daniel, but he had left town years ago, and for the first time in her life Pat had found herself living alone. She had no one to cook and clean for, no one to share evening meals with, no one to bid her goodnight when she got into bed and no one to fuss over or complain to.

Since then she had devoted herself to the *Purposeful Widow’s Brigade*, the association she had founded and made herself President and Treasurer of within a week of Brian’s death. She believed widows, banding together, could make important

contributions to the community. They could engage in volunteer charity work and lobby the local council for the betterment of the town. Pat had been so utterly lost in the few days after Brian's passing that she had been spurred on to undertake a personal crusade. She wanted to rescue other women from the void of life after the death of a husband. Her motto, which she said now with gusto to rally Nancy, was, 'We must be useful'.

Nancy followed Pat out to her car and sat quietly as they reversed down the drive.

'I w-w-wonder how Mary is doing,' she said quietly, a tear skipping over her swollen cheek.

Pat looked at her.

'Nancy. I've told you about keeping your emotions to yourself. The last thing Mary wants is you blubbing on her doorstep.'

Pat returned her gaze to the road wondering if she'd made the right choice electing Nancy to the position of Secretary of the PWB.



Mary stood on the back verandah of the farmhouse and watched as Donald's body, wrapped in a sheet, was carried out on a stretcher to an ambulance. The morning sky was dark and spots of rain hit her face. The ambulance moved away slowly and Mary thought she should wave. She was still waving, staring vacantly out across the farm, when Pat and Nancy came up the drive a short while after.

'Mary, come inside. Get out of this nasty weather,' Pat said, arriving at her side.

She motioned for Nancy to take Mary's arm and together they escorted her to the

kitchen.

‘What are you doing here?’ Mary asked, her eyes adjusting to the bright lights inside.

‘We’ve come to help, my dear. You are going to be all right. We’ll take care of everything,’ Pat said.

Nancy pulled a chair behind Mary’s knees and made her sit. Pat placed the lilies on the table and gave Mary the card.

‘You have our deepest sympathies, Mary,’ she said.

Nancy gave Mary a squeeze from behind and choked on her words a little more than usual.

‘S-s-sorry M-m-mary. A t-t-terrible l-l-loss.’

Mary said nothing and stared at the bouquet on the table.

‘Nancy, we’re going to need pen and paper,’ Pat instructed, getting down to business. ‘See if you can find a bible as well. Mary may want to pray.’

The two women buzzed around Mary like hornets. She felt dizzy and toppled off her seat onto the floor.

Pat and Nancy rushed to her aid.

‘This is going to be worse than expected,’ Pat said.

**- GOOD TURN OUT -**

**FUNERAL NOTICE**

PEDDLEY. –

A funeral service of Thanksgiving and Celebration for the life of Mr DONALD WESLEY PEDDLEY will be held at the St Agathas Uniting Church at 10am on Saturday, 13 July. A burial will take place in Baxters Creek cemetery at the conclusion of the service.

All flowers and donations to be arranged through the Purposeful Woman's Brigade. Refreshments will be served at conclusion of burial.

The day was grey and wet. The sliver of sky Goldie could see through one of the gaps in the milk bar's masked windows, was dark and heavy with rain clouds. She heard the occasional rumble of thunder. The mood had been set for a funeral.

At dawn Goldie had heard the tolling of the church bell, ringing from St Agathas tower up on the hill. She crept through the kitchen into the milk bar and perched herself on a box in the shadows behind the shop window. She waited patiently for the ritual to begin.

It was mid morning when she caught sight of the hearse motoring slowly up Monty Street, followed by a procession of mourners on foot. At the front of the parade she saw Mary Peddley flanked by Pat Thompson and Nancy Kilpatrick. They held Mary



by the elbows, as if they were carrying her down the street, and wore heavy veils to hide the grim expressions on their faces. Behind them Alexander Bourke was marching slowly with his wife and daughter. In his dark suit Alexander looked like a penguin waddling down the street. His daughter, wearing high heels and a tight, short skirt, was finding it difficult to keep up.

At the rear the Handley boy was walking solemnly with Doctor Gibbons, Roy and Helen Digby from the fish and chip shop, Mabel Simpson from the newsagents and the Williams brothers from the butchers. A handful of grieving farmers and their wives, whose names Goldie had either never known or forgotten, joined the procession as it passed. It was a good turnout.



Jack Diamond saw the procession from inside the pub and came out onto the street to pay his respects. He stood in the pub doorway leaning on a broomstick. He wanted to see Mary's face, and wanted to let her know that he was thinking of her, but instead he bowed his head. When the spectacle had passed he went back inside and poured himself a tall glass of beer.



Kevin watched the parade pass from the kerb out the front of the *Advertiser*. He took photographs as people moved by. No one took any notice of him except the members of the Bourke family. Alexander and Teresa waved at him urgently to put the camera away. They were not impressed. Bianca, however, smiled for the camera.

Kevin noted Bianca's ex-boyfriend, Travis Handley, drifting along at the tail end of the crowd. He was struck by the gloominess of the young man's carriage. His shoulders were sunken. His arms were limp at his sides. His face was white. Kevin noticed how Travis' suit was too big for him. He looked lost in it. Poor guy is swamped with grief, Kevin thought.



Lynne watched the parade wind down Monty Street from the kitchen at the rear of the restaurant. She lit incense sticks and placed two oranges in Buddha's lap. She said a silent prayer. When she saw Alexander walking along holding hands with Teresa and Bianca she picked up a large chopping blade and threw it across the kitchen.



Goldie waited until the procession had ascended the hill to St Agathas before withdrawing to the kitchen. She took her notebook from the bench, flipped through to the back and wrote.

*July 8 1973*

*11.09am*

*Donald Peddley.*

*Dead.*

*Wonder how?*

*Will pay my respects.*

*Storm brewing.*

## **- SINGLE TERRIBLE MOMENT -**

Mary was ushered to a pew at the front of St Agathas. She stared at the flowers on the altar and hummed quietly along with the organ. All eyes were on her.

When other women Mary knew had lost their husbands, they had staged grand performances of anguish as a way of marking their loss. Mary felt there was some expectation upon her to display visible signs of distress.

At her husband's funeral, Hewlett Willoughby had collapsed on the altar and had to be carried, by the pallbearers, from the church. When Frank Kilpatrick died, his fit and active wife of forty years, Nancy, had to be brought to the cemetery in a wheelchair. At the mass for her husband Brian, Pat Thompson had thrown herself across the coffin and taken the Lord's name in vain during the singing of the first hymn. She had to be taken to the Reverend's vestry and given scotch, straight up, and the memorial service had to be suspended for a number of hours to give the inconsolable woman a bit more time to get used to the idea of becoming a widow. A certain standard had been set.

As Donald's casket was placed at the altar, Mary hoped that her grief would choke her similarly, and that she would be propelled to express her sorrow in public in some extreme fashion. She prayed that her body would manifest appropriate signs of misery so that others would think that she was suitably afflicted. At the very least, she hoped that she would be hijacked by an uncontrollable sob, and that a heaving chest and trembling jaw might render her incapable of delivering a eulogy. But instead, the funeral was an uneventful affair. There wasn't a single terrible moment in it.

Embarrassingly, the tragedy of loss Mary had expected to descend upon her,

failed to arrive. The tears she had anticipated did not come. She was sore from days of being held in the grip of disbelief, but it had been a relief to be finally on a pew at the front of the church farewelling the man she'd given most of her adult life to. She should have tried to bring more emotion to the surface, if only for the guests, but there simply wasn't any more she had to give.

The congregation sang *The Lord is My Shepherd*, knelt on the unforgiving floor and prayed, and sat unwavering through the eulogies.

Alexander Bourke's exaggerated recollection of Donald's contribution to the town was the liveliest performance.

'Donald was a devoted husband to Mary, and loving father of their daughter, Ginny, may she also rest in peace,' he said, reading from prompt cards held in his hand.

'He was a dairy farmer who loved milking cows. He milked them everyday for forty years. It is thanks to men like him that we have milk for our breakfast and calcium for our bones. His passing is a great loss to our community.'

Teresa listened intently to her husband's oration to make sure he didn't miss a beat. She'd spent hours writing it and had made Alexander rehearse five times in front of the mirror.

Pat sat next to Mary throughout the service, clutching her arm and guiding her through the hymnbook. She tapped Mary's hand every few minutes and whispered into her ear.

'Let it go, Mary. Let it go.'

She even poked Mary in the ribs at regular intervals to ensure she was still conscious.

Nancy spent the service trying to hold her breath. She didn't want Pat to catch

her weeping or blowing her nose. It was Mary's day, she kept telling herself. She tried to think of happier times and to convince herself that it was a blessing Donald had gone, but she found it hard to look away from the coffin just a few feet in front of her. It was just like the one she'd buried Frank in. During the singing of *Abide With Me* Nancy sobbed into a handkerchief covering her mouth.

Travis sat in the back pew with his head hanging low. He wanted to tell Mary how sorry he was. He wanted Bianca, sitting on the pew in front of him, to turn around, take his hand and smile at him.

Bianca's attention was on matters back at the *Advertiser*. Her father had insisted she attend the funeral and she had begrudgingly called Kevin at the office to tell him she was having the day off. He'd passed on his sympathies to her and the rest of her family.

'Take as much time as you need,' he had said.

Perhaps he was coming around after all, Bianca thought, wondering what she would wear to dinner with him at the pub.

At the conclusion of the service, the crowd followed the hearse up to the cemetery behind the church. People stood shoulder to shoulder on the freshly cut lawn and wept politely. Alexander placed a shire-funded wreath on Donald's tombstone. Pat and Nancy presented a bunch of flowers sponsored by the PWB.

It was at that moment that Mary finally began to sniffle, but she knew it was her hay fever, infuriated by the grass and the flowers, that had caused her eyes to redden.



At the wake, organised by the Purposeful Widow's Brigade and staged on the

verandah of the Peddley homestead, Mary courteously accepted condolences and words of advice. She was made to sit in the living room and Pat and Nancy ushered visitors in to see her.

The Bourke family paid their respects. Teresa and Bianca stood in the doorway while Alexander spoke on their behalf.

‘A good man Mary. He was a good man. They don’t make them like him anymore.’

Mary watched his chin wobble as he spoke and was surprised when he lent over and pressed one of his business cards in her palm.

‘Should be able to get you a real good price for this place. Real good,’ he said.

Pat and Nancy were quick to move him on.

When Travis came to Mary he held her silently in his arms and kissed her on the cheek. She said nothing, but she nursed him in return. Travis left the gathering shortly afterwards and drove home to be comforted by Betty.

The only upset of the entire day came when the jugs of beer and finger food had run out.

Pat and Nancy had planned to only serve light refreshments. Pat had drawn up a menu of sandwiches, sponges, tarts and savoury flans. She had charged Nancy with setting up the urn with plenty of hot water for cups of tea and coffee. However, it had been Mary’s request that beer and hot finger food be served and, though they tried to dissuade her from it, Pat and Nancy agreed to make the arrangements. They had gone to the pub to see Jack Diamond the day before.

Jack had been sitting at one of the tables in the *Taylors Arms* dining room, sipping a beer and cleaning cutlery, when Pat and Nancy called in.

'Mary wants a keg, a box of beer glasses and savoury party food for Donald's wake,' Pat said. 'Can you organise it?'

'No worries,' Jack replied.

'It would be best if you deliver it and set up while we are the service,' Pat said.

Jack usually had boxes of pies and pasties in the freezer for these sorts of occasions but he'd let stock diminish along with the profits of the bar. He had bags of chips and peanuts out the back, but this was an important occasion. He wanted to do something for Mary. After Pat and Nancy had gone, he ducked up the street to have a chat with Lynne Fontaine.

When Jack entered the *Emperors Dragon*, Lynne thought she had her second paying customer in less than a week. She rushed to Jack and gave him a menu.

'Table for one?' she asked, bowing.

'Nah, love. Haven't got time. Just wondering if you can do us a favour?'

'Sure. I help out. What is it?'

'There's a party up at the Peddley place tomorrow and they need some food. Reckon you could knock something up?'

'I make Mini Spring Rolls. Dim Sims. Pork Wantons.'

'Sound marvellous love. I'll pick them up in the morning.'

At the wake, Lynne's finger food was a huge success. The salty meat of the wontons, the spiced cabbage in the spring rolls, and the deep fried skin of the dim sims



were the perfect compliment to Jack's ice cold beer. They gave the drinkers an unquenchable thirst and had everybody talking.

'That's different,' Mabel Simpson said, biting into one of the Mini Spring Rolls.

'Bit spicy,' Bianca said.

'Who made these?' Mary asked, holding a wonton in the air.

Alexander knew the answer but dared not say a word. Pat and Nancy had their suspicions as to where the food had come from too, and were horrified at the end of the day when most of their sandwiches and cakes were left untouched.

By nightfall everyone, except for Pat and Nancy, had left the Peddley farmhouse. They had insisted on attending to the remaining dishes and were keen to freeze the leftovers. Mary left them squabbling over portions of sponge and lemon slice and went out onto the verandah. She wandered down the driveway and thought back to Donald's last words. It began to dawn on her what it was that he *knew*.

She glanced over to the empty beer keg and all the washed glasses from the pub.

'I wish you were here,' she mumbled to herself, thinking not of Donald, but Jack.

## - DIFFERENT OUT OF THE OFFICE -

The Bourkes were seated and waiting when Kevin entered the *Taylors Arms* dining room. Alexander was sitting at one end of the table with his arms folded across his stomach. Teresa had not altered her appearance since the funeral but Bianca had donned a slinky black dress with spaghetti thin straps, one of which had fallen down to fully reveal a fleshy pink shoulder. Kevin wandered over to them.

‘Evening folks,’ he said, rubbing his hands together nervously. ‘Can I get you all a drink?’

‘Scotch with cola. No ice,’ Bianca said, pleased to see him.

Alexander pushed his empty glass to Kevin.

‘Lemon Squash for the missus and a beer for me,’ he said.

Kevin turned to the bar and saw the one-legged publican waiting to greet him.

‘I’m Jack Diamond. I run this joint,’ he said.

‘Good to meet you,’ Kevin said, holding out his hand.

‘Feel like I already know you’, Jack said.

‘Being watched, am I?’ Kevin said.

‘You’ve got no reason to worry about me. I’m a friend to any man who drinks beer. What are you having?’

Kevin swallowed hard.

‘I’d like a Riesling, actually,’ he said. ‘If that’s okay.’

He wondered if Jack’s offer of friendship extended to men who drank wine.

‘Coming right up,’ Jack said.

He poured the drinks and placed a bowl of peanuts on the counter.

'The nibbles are on the house,' he said. 'Ten bucks for the booze.'

Kevin handed him the money.

'Good luck,' Jack said quietly as Kevin stepped away.

Back at the table, Kevin kept up his guard. He sat opposite Bianca and felt like he'd just joined a game of chess.

'Its been a good week,' Alexander toasted, raising his beer into the air. 'Keep up the good work Dwyer and we might just let you stay.'

Bianca and Teresa took sips from their glasses without joining the toast. Kevin raised his glass and chinked it with Alexander's.

'I usually like to give a job six weeks before I decide if I like it, so I'll let you know in another five weeks,' he said.

Alexander didn't Kevin's tone. He took a swig of beer.

'Well, in the mean time, let me know if there is anything I can do to make your stay in Baxters Creek more agreeable,' he said.

Teresa interrupted the banter.

'Alexander,' she said. 'I'm not feeling well. Why don't you take me home and we'll let these two enjoy the night.'

'Good idea, love.'

Alexander skulled the rest of his beer and was quick to his feet. He strolled over to the bar and called Jack from the back.

'Make sure you give them whatever they want,' he said to the publican, handing him a fifty-dollar note. 'The more the merrier'.

Jack took the money and returned to a crossword puzzle out the back, leaving Kevin to his own devices.

‘You look different out of the office,’ Bianca said, moving to one of the seats closer to Kevin. ‘You seem different too. More relaxed.’

‘Pity your folks had to go,’ Kevin said.

‘I’ll have another drink,’ Bianca said. ‘Make it a double this time. Hold the cola.’

Kevin went to the bar and got Bianca her drink, and then another three more after that. She was drunk by eight o’clock. Kevin had tried to discourage her , but with each drink Bianca became more belligerent.

Jack came out to the dining room to tell his guests the kitchen was about to close and found Kevin sitting alone.

‘She sick?’ he asked.

‘Afraid so,’ Kevin said. ‘I’ll take her home.’

Bianca insisted on following Kevin upstairs to the flat above the *Advertiser*.

‘Wait here,’ Kevin had told her, sitting her in one of the chairs in the office foyer. ‘I’ve just got to find my car keys.’

Bianca had sobered enough to make sense of her location and stumbled after him. She found him sitting on his bed rustling through the bedside table. She raced over to him and flung herself onto the bed.

‘I’m horny,’ she said. ‘Take my knickers off’.

Kevin stood up and turned to see her kicking off her shoes and pulling down her

pantyhose.

‘I’m taking you home Bianca. Get dressed.’

‘Come on scoop. Here’s something newsworthy.’

Bianca pulled of her underpants and hitched up her dress.

Kevin fled from the room and went to his car on the street. He sat in the driver’s seat with the keys in the ignition and realised he had nowhere to go.

Back on his bed, Bianca had passed out with her knees in the air.

## - A MESSENGER -

Goldie sat in the shadows of her back porch, listening and watching the storm raging overhead. It was only an hour before daybreak, yet the sky was still black. Thunderclouds were looming over the peaks of the ranges off in the distance. Goldie wanted to get her notebook and pen. The weather conditions were begging to be documented. Ferocious winds. Very low temperatures. There was the occasional flash of lightning high in the sky. Still a few kilometres away, but definitely heading this way.

But she resisted. She had a visit to make.

Once again, she disappeared out of her yard through the back fence.



Over at the *Taylors Arms*, Jack had locked up downstairs and was smoking a cigarette on the balcony outside his first floor bedroom. The wind was roaring up Monty Street. It howled as it whipped through the pub's awnings.

A bolt of lightning stretched out above Baxter Creek and in its glow Jack saw Goldie crossing Monty Street. He followed her with his eyes as she scurried up the ridge to the cemetery behind St Agathas.

'What are you up to?' he said.



In the cemetery Goldie found Donald Peddley's grave. She took a crucifix, which she'd made by binding two twigs with the remnants of an old shoelace, from her pocket. She pushed it into the wet soil and knelt down to pray. The sky erupted with deafening thunder. Goldie felt the force of it above her and cowered, but still managed to look up. She saw a white-hot fork of lightning crackle across the sky in front of her and strike St Agathas' bell tower. The tower exploded and erupted into flames, and the bell toppled onto the roof of the church and plummeted to the ground, electrified. Goldie watched in disbelief. Burning timber fell from the sky like fireworks.

Goldie got to her feet and stumbled towards the church. Hot coals and burnt metal were scattered across the grass. One of the trees in the yard was on fire. Black smoke rose high into the sky.

Panicking, Goldie tripped.

When she got up she saw the body of a large bird, the size of a human child, on the ground in front of her.

'Jesus Christ,' she said.

She reached out to touch it. Its feathers were singed and soiled with blood. Its breathing was faint. Goldie scooped the creature up in her arms and headed for the milk bar. It was an omen, she told herself. A messenger with wings.

||



## **- AFTERMATH -**

Kevin was woken by the smell of smoke. He sat up in the driver's seat of his car and saw lights flickering in the rear vision mirror. Up on the ridge, the roof of St Agathas was ablaze. Flames leapt high into the night sky.

'Shit,' he said, feeling for his camera bag.

In the fire's glow he saw the silhouette of a man on the church steps. Kevin turned the key in the ignition, reversed from the kerb and drove up toward the ridge.

From the car park he saw Jack Diamond banging on St Agathas doors with his fists, the fire roaring above him.

'Mr Diamond,' Kevin called out as he climbed from the car. 'Mr Diamond.'

When Jack failed to respond, Kevin drew the handkerchief from his pocket to cover his nose and mouth, and headed through the heat and smoke.

'What are you doing?' he shouted.

'There's a bucket inside,' Jack screamed back.

Saliva was foaming in the corners of his mouth and his face, dripping with sweat, was beetroot red.

'The bloody door's locked, and there's no hose on the tap,' he said.

He shook the door handles vigorously. Kevin added his weight, but the doors would not budge.

Above them a beam from the church awning buckled with heat and came away from the roof. Kevin grabbed Jack and dragged him off the steps. Both men fell to the ground as burning timber came crashing down around them.

Kevin helped Jack to his feet and they scrambled back fifty yards as the church ceiling collapsed. Glass exploded from the windows and the church doors were blown from their hinges. Hot wind blew into the men's faces and glowing embers landed in their hair. They stood silent, shocked and in awe, watching helplessly. Kevin shot off a whole roll of film as the building burned to the ground.

When the fire began to ease, the remnants of burnt timber smouldering in the light early morning rain, Jack turned to Kevin.

'Guess that bucket won't be much good now,' he said, wiping his brow.

Kevin smiled politely then frowned. He spotted the tree next to the church. Its scorched limbs resembled a burnt crucifix.

'I'd better go call Councillor Bourke,' he said.



Goldie arrived in her yard with the injured bird wrapped up in her overcoat. In the kitchen she placed it gently on its side on the table in the centre of the room and lit candles on the windowsill, the sink and the pantry. Behind her the bird's strange, monstrous shadows leapt onto the walls. She turned and was astonished. The bird's triangular body was covered in a plume of damp golden-white feathers soiled with mud and ash. Protruding out from its oblong head was a bright orange beak. Blood was oozing from one of its oval nostrils.

Goldie bit her lip.

Either side of the beak, the bird's eyes were hidden behind wrinkled eyelids the colour of bruised apricots. Over its crown and down the length of its slender throat and neck, layers of feathers were sown into white-pink flesh like threads on a carpet. On its

side was a dropping wing. A clump of feathers had been torn from it, exposing burnt flesh and raw bone. The thing had been struck by lightning. It was limp and motionless.

Goldie worked quickly. She placed a finger near the bird's nostrils and detected a faint warm breath. Then, taking a sponge from the sink and filling a bucket with water, she cleaned the bird. She brushed away the dirt and blood on the feathers, watching closely for any signs of consciousness as she worked her way along the length of the bird. When she was done, she wiped the blood around the bird's nostrils and dabbed the wound on its wing. She could see the beak was splintered along one side and that the tear in the bird's wing was deep. Goldie thought she was going to throw up. But she steadied herself on the back of a chair and kept going. She moistened a tea towel and, approaching the animal apprehensively, wrapped it around the wound on the bird's wing. She waited for the bird to react, but it did not flinch.

Goldie hurried to the back room of the house and returned with an empty cot. She eased the bird onto the bedding and dragged the cot to the fire in the lounge room. Then, cocooned in disbelief, she collapsed into the armchair behind her. She watched the bird's breathing ease and she slowly drifted off to sleep.



When the phone rang in the hallway out at the Bourke property, Alexander was lost in a dream-laden sleep. An apparition of Lynne Fontaine was standing over him, naked, with a chopping blade in one hand and a side of roast pork in the other, slowly easing herself down onto his penis.

'Alexander,' Teresa grumbled in the bed next to him, nudging her husband's ribs with a pointy elbow. 'Get up and answer the phone.'

'Fuck. Pork,' Alexander called out, sitting up erect in bed.

He pushed back the covers, swung his feet into slippers on the floor and thumped his way out into the hallway, feeling his way through the dark house with outstretched arms.

'Do you know what time it is?' he snarled down the phone line.

'There's been a fire,' Kevin said. 'Up at the church. Nobody is hurt.'

Alexander's heart skipped a beat.

'Where's my daughter?'

'My place.'

'I'll be there immediately,' Alexander said. 'Don't touch a thing.'

He slammed down the phone and then lifted the receiver again to dial out.

Travis answered at the other end.

'Get the fire truck to the church. Pronto.'

'What?' Travis said groggily.

'You heard me, boy.'

Alexander hung up and went in search of his car keys and trousers.

## - THIS IS T-T-TERRIBLE -

'You got a light son?' Jack called out when Kevin returned to the churchyard.

'Don't smoke sorry.'

'Bugger,' Jack said. 'Should've lit up while the church was still sparked.'

Kevin watched Jack roll a cigarette in his fingers. His face was covered in soot. His hair was singed. There were small holes burnt into his trousers through which Kevin could see Jack's prosthetic leg.

'What do you think happened, Mr Diamond?' Kevin asked.

'Dunno.'

Jack wet the gum on the cigarette paper with his tongue.

'Call me Jack. You make me sound like me bloody father when you call me Mr Diamond.'

'Sorry,' Kevin said.

He took his notepad from the camera bag.

'Any comments you'd like to make about what you saw here this morning,' he asked.

'Sorry, son. I'm gunna nick off up the road and get some matches from the pub. You want anything?'

'No, I'm fine thanks, Jack,' Kevin said, unable to hide his disappointment. A first hand account of the fire from Jack, and maybe a photo of him standing in front of the remains of church would have been great for Kevin's first edition of the *Advertiser*. He could already see the headline: **ST AGATHAS BURNS.**



'Jesus Christ, Dwyer,' Alexander bellowed from St Agathas' drive. 'What the bloody hell happened?'

'Not sure,' Kevin replied, taking his hands out of his pockets and straightening his smoky attire. 'It appears a fire broke out in the roof.'

'You should've called me right away.'

'It was well alight by the time I arrived. There was no way of putting it out. There was no hose. And I thought I should cover it for the paper.'

'Bloody hell, Kevin,' Alexander scoffed, shaking his head. 'You think working for the paper puts you in charge here?'

'No sir,' Kevin said.

Alexander marched off toward the steps of the church.

'This is a bloody nightmare,' he said.

He looked up and saw the cool morning sky where the church bell tower had been. The primary beams of the church walls and roof were smouldering in front of him, charred and warped like the ends of burnt matchsticks. Smoke and steam circled in the air.

'Did you see who did this?'

'No sir.'

Alexander turned to Kevin and frowned.

'Were there any witnesses?'

'Jack was here when I arrived. He said he didn't see anything.'

Alexander paced along the church steps with his arms folded across his chest.

'This is not good, Kevin.'



'This is t-t-terrible,' Nancy spluttered as she arrived out the front of the church, dragging Mary behind her and trying to keep up with Pat. 'A c-c-catastrophe.'

'President Bourke',' Pat said. 'What on earth is going on here?'

Pat came to a standstill under Alexander's nose, and stood huffing and panting with her hands on her hips.

'Mrs Thompson,' Alexander replied, making no attempt to disguise the rolling of his eyes. 'I'll let Mr Dwyer fill you in.'

Alexander nudged Kevin and he stumbled forward.

'There's been a fire,' he said.

Pat pushed passed them and climbed the steps. She surveyed the remains of St Agathas.

'Who is responsible for this?' she said, craning her neck to look back at the others.

Her question was met with silence.

'This is a matter for the police,' she said. 'And the fire brigade. Have they been called?' She glared at Alexander.

'I've got the situation under control,' he said.



'Christ,' Travis said when she saw the gathering around the remains of St

Agathas.

He parked the fire truck in the car park. Betty was on the seat next to him and she whimpered.

‘Stay here, girl,’ he said.

Travis could hear Pat and Alexander’s raised voices and wished he could stay with Betty. He climbed from the vehicle and saw Mary, her shoulders hunched and her head hanging low.

‘You all right?’ he said when he reached her side.

‘Fine, love.’

On the steps, Alexander was arguing with Pat. Travis made note of the guy from the newspaper standing between them, nervously jotting down their comments.

‘Travis,’ Alexander said, breaking from his debate with Pat. ‘Over here.’

Travis approached the trio and Alexander took him by the arm.

‘Kevin tells me there was no hose for the tap. Would that be right?’

Travis shook off Alexander’s grip and stepped back.

‘I dunno,’ he said.

‘Well go and get one now and make sure this thing is out. We don’t want anything else going up in smoke.’

Travis gave no reply.

‘Come with me, Dwyer,’ Alexander said, ending the stand off with Travis.

‘We’ve got a few things to discuss at the office.’

Alexander took Kevin’s arm and led him to the car park.

Kevin turned back and saw Pat and Nancy circling Travis, pulling on his



shirtsleeves and giving him orders. He felt a pang of sympathy for the shire's maintenance worker.



When nobody was watching, Mary dropped back from the gathering and wandered up through the cemetery to Donald's grave. She stood and read the epitaph on the headstone.

'Donald Wesley Peddley. Cherished son of Colin and Elizabeth. Loving husband to Mary Jane. Devoted father of Ginny.'

Mary took a handkerchief from her jacket sleeve and held it to her face in anticipation of the emotion she had not been able to produce at the funeral, but once again felt nothing beyond the aching in her bones. She moved the handkerchief away from her eyes and bent down to adjust the flowers and wreath resting at the base of the headstone. The carnations on the wreath had already started to decay. Mary bent down, plucked one and squashed it in her hand. She thought of Donald's flesh decaying under six feet of soil.

'Jesus Don,' she said, opening her eyes and hanging her head.

A foot from where she was crouching, Mary spied a miniature wooden crucifix sticking up in the mud to one side of the grave. She was aghast. She couldn't recall anyone putting it there during the burial. She took it in her hand. It wasn't anything more than two twigs held together with the threads of a well-worn shoelace. But it wasn't until Mary noted the series of haphazard footprints embedded in the mud surrounding her that she was fully able to comprehend the notion that somebody had

been tampering with Donald's grave.

## **- AN ARSONIST AMONGST US -**

At daybreak Goldie was woken by the sound of gurgling. She rubbed her eyes and was surprised to find that the sound was resonating from the cot by the fire. She sat forward in the armchair and stood slowly, gently working out the stiffness that had formed in her joints, and she shuffled across the room.

In the cot the bird was exactly as she had left it, except a sucking, clicking noise came from its throat with each breath. It was like the bird had hiccups.

Goldie drew closer, placing a finger on the feathers at the nape of the bird's neck. They vibrated. She placed a hand on the creature's breast. The feathers were soft and dry, like tissue paper. She could feel the bird's heart beating. The rhythm was regular and strong, and it triggered something in Goldie. She felt concern and affection in waves and felt compelled to hold the bird in her arms, to comfort it with kisses and lullabies, and to nurse it off to sleep.

'You'll be needing to eat,' she whispered, caressing the bird's neck with the back of her hand.

It wasn't customary for Goldie to exit the house in daylight, but the circumstances called for the breaking of a few rules. She unlatched the back door warily and crept onto the porch with her bucket. She was forced to shield her eyes from the glare of the clouded morning sky with one arm. Feeling her way down the steps and into the yard, she began collecting grasses and seeds she hoped would offer the bird some nourishment.

As she foraged, Goldie detected a strange odour. She stepped into a clearing in the yard near the clothesline and glanced up into the sky. A steady haze of smoke and steam wafted over the roof of the milk bar. She retreated to the house and made her way into the shop. Looking up at St Agathas through a gap in the milk bar window, she could see that there was nothing left of the church. A lump formed in her throat.



Bianca was standing in the *Advertiser* foyer brushing her hair, wearing nothing but a towel, when her father and Kevin arrived.

‘Sweetheart,’ Alexander said, wrapping her in his arms. ‘Thank Christ you’re all right.’

‘I’m fine,’ she said, pushing him out of the way so she could see Kevin.

‘I took a shower. I hope that’s all right.’

Alexander stood back and registered his daughter’s appearance.

‘Get dressed and wait for me in the car,’ he said.

Bianca turned to obey her father but stopped before she went back up to the flat.

‘Thanks for last night, Kevin,’ she said.

Kevin blushed.

‘Shall we?’ Alexander said, pointing to Kevin’s office.

Kevin watched Alexander pacing the room, agitated and refusing to take a seat.

‘What happened between you and my daughter?’

‘Nothing, sir. Nothing at all. I swear on my mother’s grave.’

Alexander was taken back by the absolution of Kevin’s denial. Now he wanted to

know why nothing had happened, but he let the subject drop. There were more important matters to deal with.

‘Looks like there’s an arsonist amongst us,’ he said.

‘What makes you say that?’, Kevin said, reaching for his pen and notepad.

Alexander thumped Kevin’s desk with his fist.

‘None of this is for the paper,’ he said. ‘Show some respect boy. We’ve just lost St Agathas. My parents were married there. That’s where I was baptised. Teresa and I were married there. That’s was where Bianca was to get married someday.’

Alexander was visibly upset. His fat neck and cheeks reddened.

‘But don’t you think people will want to know what’s happened? This is huge news. Exactly what we need for next week’s page one,’ Kevin said.

‘I’ll call a town meeting,’ Alexander said, storming out of the office.



‘Shocking. Dreadful. Awful,’ Mabel Simpson said, shaking her head as Pat, Mary and Nancy entered the newsagents. ‘I can barely bring myself to look up there at the blackened mess.’

Pat lined Mary and Nancy up at the counter and spoke on their behalf.

‘We are devastated, Mabel,’ she said. ‘We’ll be requesting a full inquiry.’

‘Are there any leads on how it started?’ Mabel said.

‘It’s highly suspicious,’ Pat said.

Mabel glanced at Mary and Nancy. Nancy had a smudge of soot on her nose and was busy rummaging through her handbag for a tissue to attend it. Mary was biting her lip and staring off into the distance.

‘We’ll be launching a campaign to restore the site to its former glory,’ Pat said.

‘How can I help?’ Mabel asked.

‘We’ll need raffle tickets and a log book for recording income and expenditure.’

Mabel led the women to the back of the shop and pointed out the items. While Pat inspected the ticket booklets, Mabel turned to the other two women.

‘How are you Mary?’ she asked. ‘What a terrible thing to happen so soon after Donald’s passing.’

‘Yes. It is odd,’ Mary said.

Mabel took hold of her hands.

‘I’m sure he’s resting in peace.’

Mary looked into Mabel’s eyes and felt tempted to confide in her, but Pat interrupted.

‘Nancy, drive Mary to the farm and stay with her. I’ll be out as soon as I finish here.’

Nancy took Mary by the elbow and led her out of the shop.

Teresa Bourke came into the newsagents just as Pat was finalising her purchases for the PWB.

‘What’s going in this town, ladies?’ she asked. ‘My daughter doesn’t come home. An arsonist torches the church. And Mary Peddley just collapsed outside the pub.’

Teresa counted with her fingers as she listed the events.

‘I think I know who might be behind this,’ Pat said, hoping to calm Teresa.

She turned and glared at the old milk bar across the street.



## **- THE FIND -**

Travis reversed the fire truck closer to the remains of St Agathas, attached one of the hoses and watered the smouldering debris scattered around the yard. Betty followed him, licking up the water leaking from splits along the hose.

As he moved about the yard Travis sifted through piles of coals and ash with his foot. He found the remnants of pages from bibles and hymnbooks, fragments of the stained glass windows and the charred remains of the porcelain statue of the Jesus which had graced the altar inside the church. Travis' anger toward Alexander subsided as he was gradually overcome by the gloominess of the task at hand.

When he arrived at the church bell, resting on its side and dug into the soil, Travis bent down to inspect it. He ran his hand across the dented dome. It was warm. He took his hand away and discovered his fingers were stained. He rubbed them together and put them to his nose. The substance smelled familiar. Betty came to his side and nudged his elbow. She wanted a sniff too. Travis waved his fingers under her nose and she licked them clean. She seemed to agree with Travis' diagnosis. It was blood.

He stood and rinsed the bell with the hose.

When the job was done Travis noticed Betty had wandered off. He whistled and called for her.

'Bette. Here girl.'

Betty barked but Travis couldn't see her.

He headed for the far side of the yard and found her standing over a pile of



burnt rubble.

‘Come on, we’re going,’ he said.

Betty looked at him and cocked her head.

Travis went to her.

‘What have you found?’ he said, kneeling down.

On the ground, at Betty’s feet, was a clump of golden feathers, charred at the tip and splattered with drops of blood. Gruesome, Travis thought, and puzzling.

‘Good girl,’ he said to Betty, rubbing the back of her head.

Travis put the feathers in his pocket and led Betty, by the collar, back to the fire truck.



Goldie poured a mixture of grasses and water into a bowl and took it into the lounge room. Approaching the cot, she noticed the bird had moved. Its feet were stretched out and it had turned its head. Goldie froze.

The bird began to twitch its tail feathers and flex its beak.

Goldie set the bowl down in the cot and stood back. The bird wriggled and rolled onto its haunches then it lifted its shoulders and neck until its head was fully upright. Very gradually, it opened its eyelids and blinked.

Goldie saw two piercing, light blue eyes, shining like opals.

‘Hello,’ she said.

The bird blinked three times and nodded in her direction. Then, it opened its beak and exhaled. The sound it produced, part wheeze and part screech, was woody and sharp like a high, slightly off key note blown through the reed of a saxophone.

‘Glad to see you’re doing better’, Goldie said. ‘You made quite an entry last night. I wasn’t sure if you would make it.’

The bird honked, a raspy quacking sound that seemed to emanate from its nasal passages, as if agreeing with Goldie’s assessment. Then, it spied the bowl of food in the cot.

‘For you,’ Goldie said.

The bird slid its beak into the mixture and began to suckle up the moisture.

‘I’ll leave you to eat in peace,’ Goldie said, withdrawing to the kitchen to attend to her own hunger.



Kevin tore the story from the typewriter and read through it at his desk with a red pen, marking corrections and edits as he went. It was a good piece. It had an arresting headline, was well structured and the language was colourful and engaging. It would make a good page one story for next week’s edition, especially with the photographs he’d taken as St Agathas had burned to the ground. Alexander would probably disagree, but Kevin put the Shire President’s concerns aside. There was a greater cause at stake. The Baxters Creek community deserved to know what had taken place.

## **CHURCH TORCHING A MYSTERY**

By Kevin Dwyer

BAXTERS Creek residents woke to the tragic news over the weekend that the town's historic, and much loved St Agathas Uniting church, had been destroyed by fire.

Local publican, Jack Diamond, discovered the church's roof was alight shortly before dawn on Saturday, 9 July.

Despite efforts by Mr Diamond and other locals to extinguish the blaze, the fire ripped through the 1890s timber building and the church was unable to be saved.

The cause of the blaze has not yet been identified. District police are investigating the remains of the church but have yet to comment on the scene.

Suspensions have been raised in the community about the possibility of the fire being deliberately lit.

Baxters Creek Shire president, Alexander Bourke told the *Advertiser* that he believed the tragedy could be the work of a arsonist.

President of the Purposeful Women's Brigade (PWB), Patricia Thompson, said the torching of the church was a sad day for the whole community.

Mrs Thompson said the PWB would commence fund raising immediately to rebuild St Agathas (see Community Diary on page 5).

Police have appealed for any witnesses to the blaze to come forward and are keen to hear from anyone who may have observed unusual behaviour in the vicinity of the St Agathas during the early hours of last Saturday.

Kevin retreated to his flat and slowly undressed to take a shower. On the bathroom floor was the towel Bianca had used. It was soaked, lying in a pool of water. He took his toothbrush from the vanity and found that it was wet too. There were remnants of toothpaste on it. He tossed the brush into the bin and climbed into the shower. Under the beads of water, Kevin's flesh tingled. He took the soap and lathered it on his chest and arms. His muscles were tense. He inspected his torso, limbs, head and neck for signs of burning from the fire. He found he had a fever. He closed his eyes and saw a vision of Travis Handley's hairless pectoral muscles emerge in the steam rising from the shower. They were firm yet gently contoured, with dark round nipples. Then, he imagined Travis stepping into the shower with him, with a coiled fire hose in one hand.



Lynne was sipping green tea in her kitchen when Alexander crept in through the back door. She had circles around her eyes and was rubbing her forehead with one hand. Her face was white.

'You right love?' Alexander asked, putting his hands on her shoulders.

Lynne did not look up at him.

'Have you heard?' he asked.

'What?'

'St Agathas. Burnt to the ground. Bloody disaster.'

'When?' Lynne asked.

She only half listened as Alexander recounted the morning's events. She was preoccupied with the vision she'd had in her sleep. A gold dragon had swept down from the sky and had scratched her belly with its claws whilst she lay in bed. She'd woken screaming and had to race to the sink to be sick. She'd been feeling nauseated and restless ever since.

'Did you see anything?' Alexander asked, noticing that he'd lost Lynne's attention.

'No.'

Alexander took her in his arms. He could see she was in a bad mood. Her otherwise smooth, unblemished brow was creased. He swept her hair over one shoulder and leaned into nibble on her neck. She put her hands on his chest and pushed him away.

Alexander huffed and stood with his hands on his hips.

‘What is it now?’

Lynne glanced up at the statue of Buddha. The statue stared back at her, its large, swollen stomach mocking her.

‘I think I have your baby,’ she said.

## **- GET RID OF IT -**

The bird had dozed off after eating and Goldie had decided to rest in her own bed. When she woke, the house was dark and the fire in the lounge had gone out. She went to the cot to check on the bird, but it was empty.

Goldie listened for movement, but the house was silent. She took a candle from the mantle and lit it. The parameters of the lounge room became visible. Goldie scanned the furniture for signs of disturbance. The records by the gramophone, the cushions on the couch and armchair, and the ashtray on the coffee table were all in place. There was no sign of the bird.

'Hello,' she called out.

When there was no response, she walked slowly through to the kitchen. She held the candle high and waved it through the air, directing its light across the room. The benches and table were clear, and the chairs in order. The pots and utensils on the sink were as Goldie had left them. The pantry doors were still shut. For a moment, Goldie was paralysed. Could someone have entered her house while she was asleep and taken the bird?

Then, on the floor in front of her, Goldie spied a moist dollop. She bent down and jabbed it with a finger. It felt like warm custard. She put her finger to her nose and sniffed. It was the bird's excrement. She wiped the finger on her dress and noticed the door from the kitchen to the milk bar was ajar. With the candle stretched out in front of her, she went in.

Inside she could hear the bird scratching about. She approached with the candle

held high and found it behind the shop counter. It stood tall, seeming larger on its feet than it had slumped in the cot. The top of its head was level with Goldie's waist.

The bird froze in the light and looked up at her.

'What are you doing?' Goldie said.

The bird came out from behind the counter and stopped directly in front of her. It arched its neck and honked at her. The noise echoed around the shop.

'What's wrong?' Goldie said.

The bird honked again and rose up on its feet, stretching out its wings. Goldie took a step back. The bird honked a third time, then it lunged at her, snapping at her ankles with its beak.

Goldie hurried back into the kitchen with the bird in pursuit, grabbed a broom and turned to confront the creature. It propelled itself onto the table and honked again, the sound shifting up a key.

'What do you want?' Goldie said.

The bird walked toward her and stretched out its neck. Its head loomed over Goldie's. Goldie closed her eyes and waited for the creature to strike her. She sensed the bird's shadow moving across her face. It lowered its head beneath her chin and gently began probing her neck with its beak, making sense of her by her smells. Then, it worked its way up onto Goldie's face, nudging her lips, nose and earlobes with its beak. The probing was alarming, but harmless. The hairs on Goldie's arms stood on end. She could feel beads of sweat on her brow, and she felt weak at the knees.

She opened her eyes and the bird drew back. The pair stared at one another, taking it in turns to blink. Slowly, Goldie raised her hand toward the bird's face. It leaned forward and rubbed its head against it, massaging its temple in her palm. The

feathers were thick, but soft. Goldie's heart was pounding in her chest.



Alexander shifted his car's engine up a gear and headed out onto Dirrigans Road. The valley floor swept passed him as he sped up. He wound the window down and a gust of crisp air blew through his hair.

'Bitch,' he said.

When Lynne had informed him she was pregnant, Alexander had lost his temper. He'd thrown a bottle of sesame oil and a chopping blade across the restaurant kitchen and punched a sack of jasmine rice with his fists. The sack had split open and rice had scattered across the floor. Lynne had squealed and run into her bedroom, and Alexander had charged after her looking like he wanted to take her by the throat. Lynne had thrown herself onto the bed and sobbed into a pillow. Alexander had stood over her, fuming.

'This is not part of the plan,' he'd angrily told her. 'You'll have to get rid of it.'

'You don't love me,' she had screamed back.

Alexander hadn't known what to say to that. He'd left, got in his car and hastily driven out of town.

He eased his foot off the accelerator, pulled the car to the side of the road and rested his head on the steering wheel. His stomach grumbled. He suddenly felt a craving for noodles with fried onions, fresh grated ginger and soy sauce.





## **- A NEW BEGINNING -**

'I'm fat,' Bianca said, staring at her reflection in the mirror on her mother's wardrobe door. 'That's why he doesn't like me.'

'You are not,' Teresa said, stepping in to remedy Bianca's posture.

'Maybe you just come on too strong. Kevin's not like the men around here. He's a bit more reserved. Polished. You just need to be more of a lady.'

Bianca screwed her nose up.

'What do you mean?'

'Take a softer approach. Appeal to his interests.'

Bianca watched her mother's reflection as Teresa sat on the bed behind her.

'How do I do that?'

'Find out what he likes, and get involved in it,' Teresa explained. She reached for the framed photograph of her and Alexander on their wedding day and tapped the glass with a fingernail.

'When I met your father I knew nothing about property management,' she said. 'I realised that if the marriage was going to work, I'd have to get interested in real estate quick-smart.'

Bianca returned to her own reflection and studied the length of her skirt. It barely reached halfway down her thighs.

'I already work with him,' she said. 'He doesn't seem to have many interests beyond that.'

Teresa conjured an image of the journalist in her head.

'He's tidy. He dresses well. He looks like he appreciates the finer things in life,' she said.

Teresa got up from the bed and took Bianca's hair in one hand. She wrapped it into a scroll and placed it at the top of her head.

'What do you think?' she said.



Travis and Betty arrived at the Peddley farm and found Mary on the porch.

'No scones today, love. Sorry,' she said.

Betty plonked herself at Mary's feet, but Travis remained standing.

'How's things?' he asked.

'Okay, I guess,' he said.

Mary could tell he wasn't being honest. He hung his head and refused eye contact.

'What is it?' she asked.

Travis took the clump of golden feathers from his shirt pocket. The blood had dried and the feathers had become brittle. He placed them on his palm for Mary to inspect.

'Betty found these up at St Agathas,' he said. 'And there was blood on the church bell too.'

Mary brushed the feathers with the back of her hand.

'I know this probably isn't the best time,' Travis said. 'But I wasn't sure who to tell.'

Mary took the feathers in her fingers.

'I found something too,' she said.

She led Travis into the kitchen and showed him the crucifix she'd recovered from Donald's grave.

Betty scratched at the wire door, wanting to be included.

'What do you reckon it all means?' Mary asked Betty, opening the door and inviting her to join them.



The bird had taken to following Goldie around the house. When she got up to prepare breakfast for them both, the bird was standing at the foot of her bed, patiently waiting for her to wake. It followed her into the kitchen and stayed close to her heels as she wandered back and forth between the pantry, the table and the stove. It even followed her to the toilet. Goldie wasn't accustomed to closing the door so she left it open. The bird stood watching her.

'Can't I even poo in peace?' she said.

While it waited for her, the bird deposited a glob of its own white and brown excrement on the carpet in the hallway.

'That's no good,' Goldie said, and a solution came to her immediately.

She went to the back room and returned with a square of white cloth and three safety pins. She knelt down beside the bird and wrapped the cloth under its belly and up over its tail. The bird's feet poked out through holes on either side. Goldie fastened the pins.

'That's better,' she said.

The bird stood in the middle of the room wearing a nappy.

In the afternoon, Goldie rested on the lounge and the goose slept in the cot. She watched the bird resting on its haunches with its beak tucked under one wing.

Its head was the size of a giant lemon. Its orange beak was brighter now it was clean. Its feathers shone like pure gold.

There was something very familiar about the bird, Goldie thought. She had seen it somewhere before. She got up and went to the back room.

When she returned, she held a photograph in her hand. It was the photo of the baby wrapped in a blanket with a soft toy bird resting at its feet. Goldie took it to the cot and held it close to the bird. It was identical. The soft toy bird in the photograph had come to life and was sleeping in the cot.

‘A duck or a goose?’ Goldie said quietly to herself.

When it was dark again, she lit candles and ran a bath. The bird trailed behind her and stood watching as she began to undress.

‘Be a gentleman and turn around,’ she said.

The bird continued to stare.

When the bath was full, Goldie stepped into the water, holding a towel around her. The water was warm and refreshing.

‘Ahh,’ she sighed, discarding the towel and easing herself down into the tub. She closed her eyes and slowly drifted off.

The bird leapt into the air and landed in the water at the other end of the bath. Water splashed onto the walls and floor and sprayed across Goldie’s face.

Goldie sat up, startled.

The bird sat opposite her, bobbing on the surface, its feet brushing against her legs under the water.

## - DOWN THE STREET -

First thing Monday morning Bianca entered Kevin's office without knocking.

'I'm having an extra half hour off for lunch today,' she said.

Kevin could find no reason to protest beyond objecting to her appearance. She'd exchanged her short skirts and sleeveless top for one of her mother's outfits and her hair was tied up in a bun. Her skirt continued all the way down to her ankles and her cleavage was concealed behind the frilled collar of a cream blouse. She looked like a librarian, or a nun. Kevin was puzzled by the transformation.

'Fine,' he said. 'I'll cover for you.'

'I have to run some errands,' Bianca said, giving him a wink.

'Just lock the door when you go,' Kevin said.

After Bianca left at midday, Kevin pulled out his notepad. There was more to the fire at St Agathas. He knew it. But the police weren't talking, and neither was Jack Diamond. There was no point asking any of the Bourke family about it. The women from the PWB seemed as baffled by the destruction as they were outraged by it. Who else could Kevin talk to?

He paced the office, tapping his pen on his lower lip. And then it struck him. The Handley boy. Travis. Maybe he would agree to an interview. And a photograph.

The phone on Kevin's desk rang, startling him. He lifted the receiver.

'The *Advertiser*,' he said.

'Hello, Kevin,' a woman said softly at the other end of the line.

Kevin was silent.

'Hello,' he said.

The caller hung up.



Jack was sweeping the footpath out the front of the pub when he saw Mary, Pat and Nancy crossing the road. Pat looked like a hen leading her chicks. Mary and Nancy were trying their best to keep up.

'Ladies,' he said, dipping his head.

Pat nodded and Nancy waved, but they kept moving. Mary slowed and dropped back.

'Hi Jack,' she said.

Jack rested an elbow on top of the broomstick and a hand on his hip. He looked down at his feet.

'Sorry to hear about Donald,' he said.

Pat and Nancy arrived either side of Mary and took her by the arms.

'Come on Mary,' Pat said. 'We're running late as it is.'

Mary smiled at Jack before being escorted down the street.



'Nancy, you take Mary round the back and fetch the trestle table,' Pat instructed when the trio arrived out the front of the newsagents. 'I'll organise the prizes and the



float.'

Nancy dragged Mary to the rear of the shop.

Pat took the raffle tickets from the shiny black handbag hanging at her elbow and fanned one of the booklets in her face.

'We've got a lot of these to sell today,' she said to Mabel Simpson.

Mary tried to be helpful with the setting up of the trestle table and chairs which Pat had insisted be arranged in the middle of the footpath, between the butchers and the fish and chip shop.

'We'll catch more people out here,' Pat whispered with cold breath into Mary's ear.

'What should I do?' Mary asked, taking the seat at the centre of the table.

'That's P-p-pat's chair,' Nancy stammered, moving in quickly to rectify the situation.

'Oh, sorry Pat,' Mary said, stepping away.

'That's fine Mary. You just sit here on the end and watch. Nancy and I have been doing this for a long time. We'll teach you everything you need to know.'

Nancy was given the job of dispensing the ticket stubs and was made responsible for keeping the table legs straight for the duration of the day. Pat was in charge of arranging the display of raffle prizes, collecting money and giving out change. Mary watched them assume their duties and felt out of place.

'I'm not sure I'm up to this,' she confessed to Pat.

'Nonsense Mary. You'll pull through.'

Pat watched as Mary slumped back into her chair. She sidled up close to her and talked quietly yet firmly.

‘Your husband may have died, my dear, but you are still alive. There is much charity work to be done.’

Mary got up from her seat.

‘I don’t feel well,’ she said. ‘I have to go home.’

Then, she dashed off across the street.

Jack was hosing down the gutter in front of the pub’s main entrance.

‘You right love?’ he called out as Mary got away.

At the bottom of the street, Mary stopped out the front of the old milk bar to catch her breath. She felt a chill pass up her blouse and cast her gaze skyward. Above her heavy clouds were building up for another storm.

‘Its bloody freezing,’ she complained to herself, turning to catch a glimpse of a shadowy figure in the milk bar window.

She gasped and stepped backwards, then realised it was her own dull reflection she had spotted. Before she could turn away though, Mary spied a small gap in the sheets of newspaper plastering the window from the inside, and she felt compelled to take a peek. She pressed her fingertips gently on the glass, raised herself up on her toes and moved an eye so close to the slit in the masking that her lashes brushed the window. She could see that there was light coming from the house out the back. She pressed her cheek harder to the window, hoping to get a better look, but she could see nothing beyond the closed door joining the shop to the house.

'M-m-mary,' Nancy called out, flustered and breathless, from out the front of the *Emperors Dragon*.

Mary ducked out of sight and fled to her car.



Out the back of the milk bar, Goldie was hunched over a boiling pot in her kitchen's fireplace. The bird stood on a chair, patiently waiting for its lunch. Both of them heard a scratching on the footpath out the front of shop and turned to the direction of the sound.

Goldie listened for rocks on the roof, tapping on the window, and children's laughter, but there was nothing. The bird turned to her with a puzzled expression. Goldie put a finger to her lips.

'Shhhh.'

The bird remained quiet. Goldie returned to the stove, the vapours from the pot steaming in her face.

## - LEARNING ABOUT DUMPLINGS -

Lynne sat at a table in the back corner of the *Emperors Dragon*, splitting peas. She ran a thumb down the spine of a pod and dislodged the soft lime peas onto the napkin on her lap. As she worked, she noticed each pea was joined to the pod by a tiny umbilical cord. It was like she was prising the unborn from a womb. She put the napkin on the table and rested her head in her hands.



Lynne Fontaine had been another person before coming to Baxters Creek. The daughter of a city based Chinese restaurateur, her real name was Ling Foo Tay. She was the hostess of her father's busy restaurant, a respectable Yum Cha and Noodle House in Chinatown, renowned for its traditional succulent Peking Duck. Alexander Bourke had walked into her life between lunch and dinner service hours one steamy Friday afternoon. Ling was in the restaurant alone, setting the tables for evening diners, when he came in. He was wearing a dark brown suit and a broad brimmed hat. He looked like a cowboy. Ling could not see his face.

'Sorry. Kitchen closed,' she said.

'Just wanted to check out the menu, love,' he said.

Ling handed him a menu and watched him as he read down the page.

'Bit hard to make out,' he said. 'Would you mind translating?'

When she took the menu from him, Ling got her first proper look at him. His face

was plump and pink. He had bushy eyebrows and a shiny red nose.

‘This one,’ he said, pointing to an item on the menu.

‘San Choy Bow,’ Ling read.

‘What’s that?’

‘Fried Pork with shallot wrapped in lettuce leaf,’ she explained.

‘And this one?’

‘House Special. Sesuane Chicken with Bok Choy in soy sauce.’

‘And this?’ Alexander asked, stepping closer.

‘Steamed Prawn Dumpling.’

‘I like seafood,’ he said, grinning. ‘I’ll try them.’

‘Kitchen shut till five.’

‘No worries, love. I’ll wait.’

Ling had led him to a table by the door and returned to polishing glasses behind the bar. Occasionally she looked up at the man in the brown suit.

Alexander sat quietly with his hat on his lap, and stared out the restaurant window. He’d unbuttoned his suit jacket and let his tummy, as round as Buddha’s, hang over the top of his belt. He looked up and caught Ling staring.

‘Any chance of a beer, love?’ he asked.

Ling fetched a bottle and a glass from the fridge and took it to him.

Alexander watched her as she poured. She had eyes like a cat and slender fingers with red painted nails. Her straight jet-black hair trailed all the way down to her buttocks. A tarnished gold bracelet dangled from her wrist and chinked against the beer glass.

‘Beautiful,’ he said, when the beer came to a head and foamed over the lip of the

glass.

Ling watched him gulp the beer down. He had pearly-white teeth and fat pink lips. A bead of perspiration rolled from his hairline down the side of his face onto his chubby neck.

‘You not from here?’ she asked.

‘No, love,’ he said. ‘Like you.’

He was from the country, he told her, a man of real estate and politics, down in the city looking to drum up some investment. He wanted to attract new businesses to his town, he explained. He had big plans for the place. A modern day shopping centre, with a car park and a fountain. Ling listened politely, conscious of the glasses needing polishing behind the bar.

‘What about you, love?’ he asked. ‘Where you from?’

‘Shanghai,’ she said.

‘Ever wanna go back?’

‘Long story,’ she replied.

‘I’ve got time to listen, if you’ve got time to tell.’

Ling sat opposite him and began to talk. She told him she had been engaged to an apprentice chef named Hua Wa Yan. They had been planning to return to Shanghai to establish their own restaurant there. Hua Wa had gone ahead of her to acquire premises and set up his kitchen, but only days before Ling was scheduled to depart he had sent a message telling her he’d met another woman and the whole venture was off.

‘Now I go somewhere,’ she told Alexander. ‘But not to Shanghai.’

When the kitchen staff returned later that afternoon, Ling sent through an order

for a serving of Prawn Dumplings, and when the dish was ready she delivered it to Alexander's table in a bamboo steamer.

'What's the best way to tackle these?' he asked.

Ling splashed soy sauce into a side dish and took chopsticks between her fingers. She held a dumpling in the air.

Alexander tried his best to imitate. The dumpling was slippery and jumped from the steamer onto his lap. His face reddened.

'Here,' Lynne offered, placing her dumpling under his nose.

He opened his mouth and she slid the dumpling in. His cheeks swelled with warm, sweet fish flesh as he chewed.

'Bloody delicious,' he said after swallowing.

Ling gave him a knife and fork, bowed and left him to finish the meal on his own. When he was done, she cleared the dishes from the table and gave him his account on a saucer with a gold-wrapped after dinner mint on the side. He took his wallet from his jacket and placed a large note on the table.

'Keep the change,' he said, putting the mint in his coat pocket.

Ling watched him leave, and wondered if he would be back.

Alexander returned a month later, again arriving in the middle of the afternoon on a Friday.

'You want more dumpling?' Ling asked as he walked through the door.

'Thought I might try something else this time.'

He chose the San Choy Bow.

'I make it for you,' Ling said, pouring him a glass of beer.

She returned to his table with two lettuce baskets filled with salty pork mince and sprinkled with hot sesame oil. Alexander invited her to join him.

‘Not sure how to do this one either,’ he said.

‘Like hamburger,’ she told him, taking one of the pork parcels in the palm of her hand.

They watched each other eat. Oil ran down Ling’s chin and Alexander wiped it with his napkin.

‘What time do you finish work?’ he asked her.

‘Late.’

That night, as she finished counting the till, Ling saw him through the restaurant window, standing on the opposite side of the street in the rain.

‘Know any good places to get a drink?’ he asked when she came skipping across the street with an umbrella.

Ling took him to a bar around the corner, and then he took her back to his hotel room. It was after they had sex when Ling had the idea.

‘How many Chinese restaurants you have in Baxters Creek?’ she asked.

‘I’ve got a missus and a daughter,’ he told her.

‘But no Chinese restaurant?’

Alexander grabbed her and put her on his lap.

‘I think it might be just what the town needs.’

A month later Ling Foo Tay was christened Lynne Fontaine.

‘The locals will find it easier to say,’ Alexander insisted as he drove her down Monty Street.



'It can take a bit for things to catch on around here,' he said. 'But don't worry, love. I'll take good care of you.'



The bell above the *Emperors Dragon* door rang.

'Are you open?' Bianca called out.

Lynne jumped to her feet.

'You want Businesswoman's Banquet?' she asked.

Bianca adjusted the skirt pinching her waist and scratched the back of her head where a hairpin was pressing into her scalp.

'I want you to teach me how to cook,' she said. 'I'm happy to pay.'

Lynne had not seen Bianca up close before. She had Alexander's full face and rounded shoulders. She had his pink cheeks and white teeth.

'Who you cook for?' Lynne asked coolly.

'Rather not say,' Bianca replied. 'It's a secret.'

Lynne led Bianca into the kitchen and got an apron for them both. She winked at the statue of Buddha on the shelf above the sink and went to the fridge.

'First we make Spring Roll,' she said. 'Then, you learn about dumplings.'

## - CROSSING PATHS -

The front bar of the *Taylors Arms* was empty when Kevin entered from the street. A light in the fridge behind the bar was on the blink and flickered at random. A television mounted on the wall was broadcasting replays of horse races. Kevin went to the bar and was greeted by a dog. It barked once, stooped in front of him and sniffed his ankles.

'Nice dog. Nice dog,' he said stepping backwards.

'Betty. Come,' Travis called out, suddenly appearing from the kitchen.

He was wearing a crumpled blue work shirt and had a tea towel draped over one shoulder. In one hand he held a sausage wrapped in a slice of white bread. He looked Kevin up and down.

'What do you want?'

'Is Jack in?'

'Won't back till later.'

Betty circled Kevin and began to snarl. Kevin smiled nervously.

'She won't bite,' Travis said.

'I just wanted to see if Jack was all right after the fire.'

Travis took a bite of the sausage.

'He's fine,' he said with his mouth full.

Betty began sniffing Kevin's thigh. The reporter flinched.

'Can I get take away?' he asked.

Travis made his way over to the bar.

'What'll it be?'

'A bottle of white wine. If you have it,' Kevin said.

Travis bent down to inspect the fridge under the bar. Kevin could see the muscles along his back flexing as his arms searched about the fridge.

'I don't think we've been formally introduced,' Kevin said.

'I know who you are,' Travis said.

Betty poked about Kevin's crotch with her nose. Startled, Kevin put his hand on her forehead and pushed her away. The dog mistook the gesture for a pat, dropped to the floor and rolled onto her back. Kevin frowned. Betty dangled her tongue out the side of her mouth.

'I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about the fire up at St Agathas?' Kevin said, looking back over the top of the bar.

'What about it,' Travis said, standing and placing a bottle of Riesling on the bar. 'This do?'

Kevin nodded and reached for his wallet.

'There's lots of stories going around about how the fire was started, but no-one seems to know the truth. I was wondering what your thoughts are,' he said, handing Travis ten dollars.

'I'm as much in the dark as the next person,' Travis replied.

'But you must have your own theory about it. I mean, do you think it was arson?'

Travis stuffed the ten dollars in the till.

'Look, my dinner's getting cold.'

'Drop in and see me at the office tomorrow,' Kevin said. 'We can talk confidentially.'

'I'll think about it,' Travis said, leading Betty back into the kitchen.



Jack eased himself down the creek bank and stepped onto the pontoon jutting out over the water. He sat, removed his prosthetic leg and dipped his one real foot in. The water rippled out from his ankle, warping the reflection of the clouds on the surface.

A breeze swept through the overhanging trees. It was too cold for a swim, but Jack persisted. He unbuttoned his shirt, removed his trousers and, naked, slid into the creek. He sank below the surface and then floated on his back. The water was freezing, but the weightlessness freed him from the arthritis in his joints and gave him back his balance. He closed his eyes.

Through the breeze came the sound of a woman clearing her throat.

'Who's there?' Jack called out, standing upright in the water.

A woman stepped out of the shadows on the bank and walked onto the pontoon. Jack swam toward her.

'What are you doing here, love?' he asked.

Mary stood still.

'Needed some fresh air,' she said.

Jack pushed out from the pontoon and glided into the middle of the creek.

'The water's beautiful,' he said. 'Once you get used to it.'

Mary kicked off her shoes and sat at the edge of the pontoon. She dangled her legs in the water but decided not to go further. She watched Jack splashing about and lent forward to wet her fingertips.

'It was horrible,' she said softly.

Jack floated to her and grabbed hold of her ankles to steady himself.

‘Sorry I wasn’t there,’ he said.

He looked up into her face. She was crying. Tears ran down her nose and splashed onto his forehead. Jack climbed onto the pontoon and sat next to her with an arm around her waist. Mary buried her face in his neck.



Alexander waited until Teresa and Bianca had gone to bed before sneaking out of the house and driving back into town.

It was midnight by the time he pulled up at the rear of the *Emperors Dragon*. The lights in the kitchen were still on and a silhouette of Lynne, seated at the table, was visible in one of the windows. He went to the back door and knocked softly. When there was no answer he called out.

‘Open up, sweetheart.’

Lynne had heard the car in the laneway behind the restaurant and Alexander’s heavy footsteps in her yard. She didn’t bother looking up from her bowl of soup and noodles.

‘I’ve got something for you,’ he called out.

Lynne placed her chopsticks down.

‘You give me plenty already.’

Alexander rattled the door handle but it wouldn’t budge.

‘Come on, darl,’ he pleaded.

Lynne heard the sound of Alexander’s knees popping out of place and a series of grunts and sighs. An envelope appeared under the door and slid across the tiled floor.

'What's that?' she said.

Alexander was silent.

Lynne got up from the table, picked up the envelope and prised it open with a fingernail. Inside was a note and at least \$500 in \$20 bills. She read the note.

*Dr Phillips. 25 Vincent Street, Corriford. Thursday 5.00pm.*

'I've arranged everything, love,' Alexander said. 'He's top notch. Does this sort of thing all the time. Promises me you won't feel a thing.'

Lynne was silent.

'There's enough cash there for you to stay over in Corriford for a few days. No need to rush back. I'll take care of things here,' Alexander said.

Lynne deposited the money in a drawer by the sink, along with Dr Phillips's details, then went to the door and slid the empty envelope back outside.

'So we've reached an agreement?' Alexander called out.

He watched Lynne's silhouette cross the kitchen and switch off the light. He heard her go into the bedroom.

'Night love,' he said. 'See you when you get back.'

## **- NOSY -**

The following morning the bird entered Goldie's kitchen. When Goldie looked up she saw it standing in the doorway with a photo in its beak.

'What have you got there?' she asked.

When the bird did not respond she got up and snatched the photo.

'I don't recall saying you could go through my things,' she said.

The bird stepped closer, stretched its neck towards her and tapped the photo with its beak.

Goldie glanced down at the picture and recognised it immediately.

In it, a much younger Goldie was standing out the front of the milk bar. She was wearing a light, almost see-through, short sleeved white cotton dress, which was open at the neck. She had a broom in her right hand and her left hand was on her hip. She was staring directly at the lens with a serious expression on her face. Tiny glistening beads of sweat twinkled like stars on her forehead. Her hair was tied neatly up off her face with a scarf, except for a thick vanilla curl, which hung like a swirl of white chocolate against her cheek. In the background, the milk bar was lit in the late afternoon sun. The shop windows were transparent, like fish tanks, and through them Goldie could see right into the shop. She could see the edge of the counter with the cash register on top and the shelves along the back wall, stacked with jars and tins and glass bottles.

Goldie looked up and found the bird standing directly in front of her.

'What do you want?'

The bird honked once and fanned its wings at her.

'You're very nosy,' she complained.

Then the bird began nudging at the photo with its beak.

'All right,' Goldie said. 'I'll show you.'

The goose moved closer, the bristles of its feathery chest pressing against her bare knee.

'That's me,' she said, turning the photo toward the bird.

The goose turned its head to one side and moved in to study the picture, then it drew its long neck back and stared at Goldie down the length of its splintered beak. It looked perplexed. It didn't seem to be able to make sense of the relationship between the woman in the photograph and the one holding it.



Goldie, otherwise known as Marigold Iris Sullivan, had arrived in Baxters Creek in the summer of 1951, carrying a small inheritance and dreams of starting up her own business. She'd been travelling on a bus from Corriford, bound for the city, and it had broken down on Monty Street.

She had wandered the retail strip while the bus driver attempted repairs. She wandered past the pub, the newsagents and the butchers, and when she spied a vacant shop at the bottom of the street, she went to inspect. A large 'For Sale' sign was hanging in the window. At the bottom of the sign were contact details for Bourke Real Estate.

She walked back up the hill, found the estate office and went in.

A fat man with bulging eyes and receding hair sat at a desk explaining paperwork to his young male assistant. The fat man was Barry Bourke, Alexander's father, and Alexander was his father's apprentice.



‘How much is the shop?’ Goldie asked.

Both men eyed her off like she was acreage awaiting subdivision. She had loads of curves, lovely bosoms and good child bearing hips. Her petticoat was showing at the hem of her skirt.

‘What sort of business you offering?’ Barry said, slurring his words.

‘A milk bar. Fresh bread. Newspapers. Sandwiches made to order. Cold drinks and cigarettes. Lollies for the kids,’ she said.

Alexander giggled and earned a disapproving look from his father.

‘Sounds interesting,’ Barry said. ‘Be good to have some new business in town.’

It cost her most of her inheritance, but Goldie was delighted with the purchase. She moved in immediately and got to work making furnishings, building shelving and ordering in stock. The locals, who had heard of her arrival, did not see her for a whole month. She worked nights and slept through the day. Rumours were rife.

‘She’s very mysterious,’ Mabel Simpson said at the time.

‘Either that or just plain rude,’ Pat Thompson said in return. ‘Lord only knows what sorts of produce the woman will have on offer.’

When Goldie finally opened the shop, the townsfolk, mainly farming families and other small business operators, came to check out what she had been up to. And they were surprised. Lined up along the shelves on the walls of the shop were exotic grocery lines; cans of beans imported from Italy, packets of noodles in a range of strange colours and shapes all the way from Asia, and jars of spices from India and Sri Lanka.

For the first year Goldie struggled to make ends meet. Some of her wares did not

react kindly with the residents of Baxters Creek. Mabel Simpson bought a chilli paste and tried marinating her lamb chops in it. The chilli brought her out in a cold, panicky sweat and gave her terrible heart palpitations. She turned up at Dr Gibbon's house claiming to be in the throes of cardiac arrest. Alexander Bourke's young bride, Teresa, ate a whole can of beans, whose name she couldn't even pronounce, and she ended up with diarrhoea for over a week. One of the William's brothers, from the butchers, tried a herbal tea Goldie had advised would help him sleep. Instead, the tea brought him out in a blistering rash and he was unable to work for days.

'This woman's dangerous,' Pat Thompson complained to Barry Bourke one afternoon in his office. 'She'll bring no good to this town.'

But then two things happened. The local school students, armed with pocket money, discovered the milk bar's confectionery counter and Goldie met Pat Thompson's son, Daniel.

Daniel Thompson had just turned sixteen when he waltzed into the milk bar one afternoon with two mates from school. Goldie noted how his uniform was dishevelled. His hair stuck up at the back, and he had mud and grass stains on his knees and elbows. He obviously liked to play rough. He also spoke loudly and swore. He was telling the other boys a dirty joke when they came into the shop. He saw Goldie, and he stopped mid sentence.

While the other boys eyed off the candy, chocolates and chewing gum, Daniel made the milk bar proprietor the focus of his business.

'Nice set up you've got here,' he said, leaning on the counter.

There was something dangerous about him, Goldie thought. The muscles of

manhood were emerging through his boyhood frame. His voice was low. A dark feathery moustache was forming on his upper lip. He had the prowess of a man five years his senior. He was cocky and broody. He had lust in his eyes.



The bird prodded Goldie on the thigh. She had drifted off to sleep.

‘What?’ Goldie said, rousing slowly. ‘Leave me alone.’

She got to her feet and stumbled off to bed.

The bird followed her.

## - CLOSER TO THE TRUTH -

Bianca was seated at her desk at the *Advertiser* with two pencils threaded between the fingers on her right hand, practising the art of eating with chopsticks. She flexed the pencils in the air and tried to lift a paper clip off the counter. The sound of the front door opening from the street startled her and she lost her grip. The pencils flew into the air and fell to the floor.

'Bugger,' she said.

She looked up and saw Travis approaching. She quickly straightened the bun on her head and smoothed the collar of her blouse.

'New uniform?' Travis asked as he arrived at the counter.

Bianca smiled wryly.

'How can I be of service today?' she asked.

'I'm here to see the boss.'

'Do you have an appointment?'

'He's expecting me,' Travis said, looking out to the street to see if Betty was still waiting for him on the footpath.

'Wait here please.'

Bianca went to Kevin's door.

'A local resident would like to speak to you,' she said, poking her head into his office.

Kevin got up from his desk and followed her to the counter.

'Mr Handley,' he said. 'Come through.'

Travis followed the reporter into his office and Kevin closed the door behind them. Bianca pretended to busy herself with paperwork and then went to the office door to eavesdrop.

‘Thanks for coming,’ Kevin said, offering Travis a chair.

‘Can’t stay. Got work to do.’

‘This won’t take long,’ Kevin said. ‘Can I get you a drink?’

Travis nodded, folded his arms across his chest, sat forward and scratched his chin. The room reminded him of being in the doctor’s surgery when he was a kid, or the principal’s office up at the school.

Kevin opened the door and Bianca fell in a few steps.

‘Two cups of tea please,’ he said sharply.

‘Certainly.’

Kevin shut the door, resumed his seat at the desk and put pen and paper in front of him

‘So, tell me what you know. About the fire.’

‘Well,’ Travis said, clearing his throat, ‘Not much.’

‘You didn’t see anything before or after? Haven’t heard any rumours? This can all be off the record if you like.’

Travis leaned forward and rested his head on his fists.

‘It wasn’t arson. I’m sure of that. But there’s definitely something funny going on,’ he said.

There was a sudden knock at the door and Bianca came in carrying a tray of refreshments. She sat the tray on the desk and offered Travis a plate of prawn crackers. He took one and looked to Kevin for further explanation.

'What's all this about, Bianca?' Kevin asked.

Bianca poured steaming liquid from a teapot.

'Some green tea?' she said, handing a cup to Travis. 'Kevin?'

'Thank you,' he said.

Bianca bowed and retreated from the room. Both men sucked on a cracker and blew the steam from the top of their drink.

'What sort of funny business?', Kevin asked, returning to the interview.

A prawn cracker was stuck to Travis's lips. He prised it off and stared at it. His lips were tingling.

'There were things found up at the church, but I wouldn't want that to get out,' he replied.

'Things?' Kevin said, edging forward in his seat.

'Pop out to the farm a bit later and I'll show you. But this stays between us, right?'

'Absolutely,' Kevin said.

Travis stood and placed his mug on the desk.

'This tea tastes funny.'



The potholes in the road leading up to the Peddley farm had deepened with the rain and winds. Nancy tried to set a course through them but occasionally one of the tires slipped on the gravel and she and Pat were jostled in their seats.

The church raffle petty cash tin toppled off Pat's lap and its contents fell about her feet.

'Keep it steady, Nancy,' she grumbled.

When they reached the house, Pat lead Nancy up onto the porch and knocked forcefully on the back door.

'Mary, ' she hollered. 'We need to talk.'

Mary came to the door in her dressing gown with her hair about her face, and Pat pushed her way into the kitchen.

'A-a-afternoon M-m-mary,' Nancy said.

Pat completed a circuit of the kitchen table.

'What's going on Mary?' she said. 'Nancy and I are very concerned.'

Mary sat and combed her hair behind her ears with her fingers.

'Ladies, I'm not up to helping with the raffle today. Do you think you can manage without me?'

'No, Mary,' Pat snapped. 'That's not good enough. You're a member of the PWB. You've got certain responsibilities. Tell her Nancy.'

Nancy stepped forward and placed the petty cash tin on the table.

'W-w-we'd like you to be in charge of the f-f-float and tickets.'

Mary smiled at the women.

'That's very kind, but I'm not sure I'm ready to join the PWB.'

Pat took a deep breath and clenched her fists and teeth.

'Let us help,' Nancy said. 'P-p-please.'

Mary stood slowly.

'No. Thank you. I need to be alone.'

Pat retrieved the petty cash tin from the table and marched out onto the porch.

'S-s-sorry,' Nancy whispered before following.

Mary locked the door behind them and disappeared into the house.

On the drive into town Pat was silent. She held the raffle cash box on her lap firmly, the corners of the tin digging into the inside of her tights.



Teresa Bourke was chewing on her fingernails at her desk, attempting to balance the real estate books. She bit through one of her thumbnails and tore off a piece with her teeth. The thumb began to bleed. She sucked on it while she reworked the calculations.

'There's money missing from the account,' she said, looking over at her husband. 'Five hundred bucks.'

Alexander was doodling on a notepad by the phone.

'I had to give someone a loan,' he said.

'Who?'

Teresa frowned and stuck her thumb in her mouth.

'The Handley boy,' Alexander said.

Teresa withdrew her thumb from her mouth and wrapped a tissue around it. She pressed firmly on the small wound and pain shot up her hand.

'What did he want it for?'

Alexander looked up from the notepad.

'I dunno. Something's wrong with his ute,'

Teresa began chewing on her other thumb.



On the notepad in front of him, Alexander had scribbled the details of the town meeting. The note read, 'Baxters Creek Community Assembly. Guest speaker Alexander Bourke. Taylors Arms front bar. 8pm tomorrow night.'

'Distribute this,' he said, handing Teresa the note.

He went to the window and glanced over at the *Emperors Dragon*. The blinds were closed and the lights were out.

'Have you followed up on the sale of the Peddley place?' Teresa asked.

'No I haven't.'

'Well, an offer and a contract won't write themselves.'

Alexander turned to her and stamped his foot.

'This is a time for grieving. Would it kill you to show a bit of compassion?'

He swung open the office door and stormed off down the street.

Teresa felt her teeth sink through the enamel of her second thumbnail and screwed her face up when the taste of blood filled her mouth.



Kevin stepped out onto Monty Street on his lunch break. He saw Alexander marching toward him and took a deep breath.

'Afternoon, Councillor,' he said. 'Glad I've bumped into you. I'm wondering if we could discuss the page one story for the next edition?'

'Not now Dwyer,' Alexander said, sweeping past him.

Kevin watched him disappear into the pub and then crossed the road. He spotted Pat and Nancy seated behind the table outside the newsagents, attending to their raffle.

‘Afternoon ladies. How’s the fund raising going?’

Pat ignored his greeting and Nancy only briefly looked up from her work counting ticket stubs. He continued on to the *Emperors Dragon* and stopped abruptly when he saw the blinds were pulled down. He put a hand up to the window to look inside. A figure moved from the back of the restaurant and came to unlock the door.

‘Are you not doing lunch today?’ Kevin asked.

Lynne shook her head.

‘I close. Sorry.’

Kevin noted Lynne’s pale complexion.

‘Are you not feeling well?’

Lynne’s gaze fell to the footpath.

‘Can I help?’ Kevin asked.

The door opened fully and Lynne stepped back.

‘You come in. We make Fried Rice.’

Kevin followed her to the kitchen and watched her oil the wok. Flames leapt up from the gas burner and the oil popped in the pan. The kitchen filled with the smell of roasted sesame seeds.

‘Is everything all right?’ he asked. ‘You seem upset.’

‘I leave town.’

‘For how long?’

Lynne tossed cooked rice into the wok.

‘I not talk about it.’

Kevin joined her at the stove. He leant forward and inhaled the steam rising from

the rice.

‘Smells great.’

Lynne turned to him and placed a hand on his wrist.

‘Tell me. I too old to have a baby?’



‘I’ll have another,’ Alexander said, thumping his fist on the bar.

‘Bit early for a binge, isn’t it?’ Jack said.

Alexander laid his money on the till.

‘I’m paying for the grog. Not the chat.’

Jack poured another beer and sat it in front of him.

‘A man’s entitled to drown his sorrows,’ Alexander mumbled, digging his hand into a bowl of nuts.

‘Sure,’ Jack said. ‘Not that it’ll do you any good.’

Alexander skolloed the beer and belched. Alcohol surged through his veins.

‘Pour me another.’

## - A FEW FEATHERS RUFFLED -

'I feel like a drink,' Goldie announced mid afternoon.

She groped around the pantry and found a collection of bottles from which she was able to extract a full glass of assorted spirits.

'To your health,' she said, raising the glass to the bird, which was sitting in a sink full of warm water and bubbles.

She went in to the lounge room, wound the gramophone and placed the needle down on a Charlie Parker record. The first track was Parker's version of the Gershwin hit, *Summertime*.

Up came the introductory notes played on cellos and violins. Then came the sweeping of cymbals and a cascade of tones on a vibraphone, followed by a flourish of notes plucked on a harp. Finally, the reedy, nasal vibrations of Parker's alto saxophone punched out the melody, filling the room with the voice of a husky, honking bird.

Goldie heard a splash in the kitchen and the bird came rushing in. It stopped in the middle of the carpet, stupefied by the sounds, water and soap suds dripping from its wings.

'It's music,' Goldie said.

The bird approached the gramophone, raised its head high into the air and honked a series of notes, replicating the sounds of Parker's sax. Goldie listened in awe as the bird became locked in conversation with the music. She gulped down her cocktail and stood to join the chorus.

*'Summertime,  
And the living is easy.  
Fish are jumpin',  
An the cotton is high.  
Oh your Daddy's rich,  
An your Mama's good looking.  
So hush little baby, don't you cry.'*

The bird thrust itself onto the coffee table, honking along to Parker's brass horn.  
Goldie swung her hips to the rhythm and threw her arms in the air as she sang.

*'One of these mornin's,  
You goin' to rise up singin'.  
Then you'll spread your wings,  
And you'll take to the sky.  
But till that mornin',  
There's a nothing can harm you.  
With Daddy and Mommy,  
Standin by.'*

At the conclusion of the song, the bird continued honking and strutting around the room, flapping its wings and jabbing the air with its beak.

'You're a silly goose,' Goldie said, and when she thought about it she realised that's exactly what it was. It wasn't a duck. It was a gander.



Nancy was the first to hear the music. She was alone at the trestle table, in charge of the raffle while Pat was in the newsagents updating Mabel Simpson on Mary's expulsion from the PWB, when she heard jazz wafting from across the street. She began humming softly and tapping her foot.

'Summertime, doody-do-da, easy,' she sang.

When Pat came back, she noticed Nancy swaying in her chair.

'What's that racket?'

Both women stared across the street to the old milk bar.

'Give us a ticket,' Alexander called out as he approached from the pub. His speech was slurred and he was staggering. He threw loose change from his pocket onto the table.

'Councillor Bourke,' Pat said. 'Can you hear that?'

Alexander cocked his head and listened. He quickly picked up the thread of the rhythm and began clicking his fingers.

'Care for a dance?' he asked, grabbing hold of Pat by the elbows.

'Alexander,' she snarled, pushing him away and turning her nose to the smell of beer on his breath. 'This is serious. She's disturbing the peace.'

Alexander followed Pat's gaze across to the milk bar.

'Have the police been to speak to her about the fire yet?' Pat said.

Alexander took a deep breath and headed across the street. Pat and Nancy followed.

'Quieten down in there,' he hollered, banging on the corrugated iron barricading the shop door. 'There are normal people out here trying to go about their business.'

Out the back neither Goldie nor the goose could hear above the sounds of the gramophone and their own voices.



In the estate office Teresa was barely able to hear the phone ringing about the racket coming from down the street.

‘Bourke Real Estate,’ she yelled down the receiver.

‘That Fontaine woman won’t teach me cooking anymore,’ Bianca said, upset at the other end of the line.

‘What?’ Teresa yelled back. ‘Why?’

‘She wouldn’t say. I think she wants Kevin for herself.’

Teresa looked through the office window to the restaurant across the street.

‘I’ll sort it out, love’ she said, hanging up the phone.

When she saw that the front door to the *Emperors Dragon* was locked, Teresa went around the back of the restaurant and knocked loudly.

‘Miss Fontaine,’ she called out.

Lynne was in the bedroom folding clothes into a suitcase. She saw a shadow pass over the window. She froze and hid down the side of the wardrobe.

‘I know you’re in there,’ Teresa called out. ‘I’ve got a bone to pick with you.’



Kevin noted the commotion outside the old milk bar as he drove up Monty Street. He passed Memorial Park, crossed the bridge and headed out of town.

'Ten kilometres along Dirrigans Road you'll see a paddock of flat land with two silos near the boundary fence. I'm the first driveway after that,' Travis had explained earlier.

Kevin spotted a gate with a rusted mailbox and a faded hand painted sign which read, *Handley*. He turned off the road and headed up the unsealed drive.

The farmhouse came into view. Perched high on a hill, hemmed by pine trees, it had two chimneys, stained glass windows and a broad bull nose verandah on all sides with a painted corrugated iron roof. Kevin pulled up in the driveway. Travis came down to greet him.

'G'day,' he said.

They shook hands. Kevin's small hand collapsed in Travis's grip.

Travis led him up onto the verandah. Before them, the valley stretched across to the horizon. Blue-grey mountains rose up in the distance. The shadows of billowing clouds high above drifted across the landscape. At their feet, Baxters Creek was nestled beneath treetops. Both men rested their elbows on the railing.

'Nice spot you've got here,' Kevin said.

'Yeah. It's not bad.'

A breeze caught a curl of hair at Travis's temple and teased the tip of his collar. Kevin turned to him, his eyes wandering down Travis's neck to the ball of his shoulder filling out the seam of his work shirt.

'Like a drink?' Travis asked, facing him.

Kevin followed him inside.



Betty was asleep at the foot of the stove and did not stir. Her coat was as dull as the decor of the kitchen. The bench tops were worn, the wooden floor was scuffed and stained lace curtains sagged on pegs above the window frames. An antique clock hung lopsided on the wall beside a hutch lined with chipped teacups and dinner plates. The room was not untidy though, Kevin noted. Surfaces were clean and uncluttered. The sink was dry and spotless. It spoke volumes of a simple, mannered young man living alone, who knew how to take care of himself.

‘Don’t have any wine, sorry,’ Travis said, handing Kevin a beer. ‘The thing I wanted to show you is through here.’

In a small den off the lounge room stood a solid oak desk with two sets of drawers. Travis sat. Kevin stood behind him quietly sipping his beer. It was cold and difficult to swallow. His eyes wandered around the room and fixed on the portrait of a young woman with a small child on her knees. The woman had long, wavy brown hair and a tiny black freckle on her upper lip. Her mouth was open slightly. The photographer had caught her on the verge of laughter. The boy on her lap had a head of wild curls and Travis’s dark eyes.

‘That’s me mum,’ Travis said. ‘She died when I was a kid.’

‘Sorry to hear that,’ Kevin said.

‘Where’s your folks?’

‘I don’t have much to do with them,’ Kevin replied. He sank a hand into his trouser pocket. ‘They don’t really approve of what I’ve done with my life.’

Travis took a swig of beer, looked up and smiled.

‘Don’t reckon I’d like a reporter for a son either,’ he said.

Kevin felt perspiration dripping down the middle of his back.

'Here it is,' Travis said, holding a shoebox under Kevin's nose.

Kevin felt gas building up in his chest. He lent forward to take a look in the box and burped.

'Excuse me.'

His face went bright pink.

'Are they feathers? Real ones?'

'I think so.'

Kevin touched them with the back of his fingers.

'What sort of creature leaves behind something like this?'

Travis shrugged his shoulders.

'Where did you find it?'

'I didn't. Betty did. Near St Agathas. After the fire.'

Kevin skulled the rest of his beer.

'Can I get a photograph of it? Are you happy for this to go on the record?'

Travis put the shoebox away and led Kevin back to the kitchen.

'I don't want the police involved,' he said. 'There's something a bit queer about all this, but I don't think it's a legal matter.'

He handed Kevin another beer and they returned to the verandah. The sun was setting. The sky was purple beyond pale silver clouds and orange shafts of sunlight. Betty joined them and sat licking her genitals.

'You're a man with a lot of secrets,' Kevin said.

Travis lent over and scratched Betty's nose.

'I'm just not sure,' he said. 'I could be completely wrong.'

Kevin sat upright.

‘What?’

‘Mary found a homemade crucifix on Donald’s grave. We reckon it could witchcraft.’

Kevin screwed his nose up.

‘Since when have there been witches in Baxters Creek?’

Travis gulped down his beer. He’d already said too much. He wasn’t even sure whether Kevin was trustworthy. He seemed like the kind of bloke who had plenty of secrets of his own. But he voiced his theory regardless. His guard was down. Perhaps it was the beer.

‘Haven’t you heard about the old woman who lives out the back of the milk bar?’

Kevin pictured the woman with the bucket on her porch and remembered the photograph he’d taken of her.

‘I’ve seen her. Who is she?’

‘Rumour has it that, years ago, she cast a spell on a local farmer’s son and made him fall madly in love with her, and she had his baby. But the kid wasn’t born right and its body ended up in the creek, half eaten by yabbies. Apparently the kid was electrocuted, but most people reckon the woman in the milk bar killed the baby with witchcraft.’

Kevin suddenly felt light headed.

‘I think I’m going to be sick.’

He lurched forward over the railing of the verandah, and vomited onto the garden.

‘I don’t reckon you can drive,’ Travis said. ‘I’ll run you in to town.’



Out the back of the milk bar, Goldie and the goose were locked in an intimate embrace. The goose stood on the kitchen table, its head resting on Goldie's shoulder. Her cheek was resting against its chest.

An Ella Fitzgerald record was playing on the gramophone. Candles on the windowsill and mantle were lit. Goldie shuffled her feet on the floor in time with the music. The goose rocked from side to side on the table top, swaying with her. Goldie sang softly.

*'You do*

*Something to me*

*Something that simply mystifies me*

*Tell me*

*Why should it be*

*You have the power to hypnotise me*

*Let me*

*Live neath' your spell*

*Do Do*

*That voodoo*

*That you do so well.'*

A tear rolled down her cheek. The goose scooped it up in its beak.



## - BEDTIME -

At the *Taylors Arms* Bianca sat watching her parents eat their counter meals, unable to stomach the plate in front of her. Teresa picked over an assortment of vegetables with a fork, and Alexander emptied tomato sauce onto steak and chips, and proceeded to chew loudly. Neither of them looked up when they spoke.

‘How’s work, love?’ Alexander asked. ‘Any progress with Dwyer?’

‘Don’t pester her,’ Teresa said. ‘Let a girl have her secrets.’

Bianca got up from the table, went to the pub’s front window and stared out across the street. She saw Travis’s ute pull up out the front of the *Advertiser*. She chewed on the straw in her drink and watched Travis help Kevin into the newspaper office.

‘You’ve upset her’, Teresa chastised Alexander at the table. ‘Let’s get her home.’

Alexander put a final forkful of steak in his mouth, washed it down with the dregs of his beer and signalled to Jack at the bar.

‘Chuck this lot on the account.’

He blew his nose in his napkin and discarded it on the table.

‘Lost your appetite, sweetheart?’ Teresa asked, placing an arm around Bianca’s waist and leading her out to the car.

Bianca was silent.

Alexander was busy searching the pockets of his jacket for car keys and did not

notice the passing vehicle.

Teresa did though. Lynne Fontaine drove her car up Monty Street, disappeared over the bridge and out of town.

'Where's she going at this hour?' she asked Alexander over the bonnet. 'Did you get her to sign that lease agreement?'



'Which way is it?' Travis asked, holding Kevin upright in the *Advertiser's* foyer.

Kevin pointed to the hallway at the back and Travis led him upstairs to the flat. Kevin flicked on the lamp and Travis eased him onto the bed. The reporter grabbed at the cramping muscles in his stomach and groaned.

'You'll be right, mate,' Travis said, stepping back.

He went to the sink, filled a glass with water and placed it next to the bed.

'Drink this when you can.'

He sat in the armchair and waited for Kevin to doze off. His eyes wandered around the flat. It was small, colourless and empty. It reminded him of one of his mother's sayings. Empty houses, empty lives. He suddenly regretted giving Kevin two beers.

'Catch up with you later, mate,' he said, flicking off the lamp and exiting the room.

As he reversed his ute, Travis spotted Mary's car coming down Monty Street. He waved to her across the dashboard but she did not register him. She drove around the back of the pub and disappeared from view. Travis headed home to Betty.



Mary switched off her headlights and unlatched her seat belt.

In front of her the rear of the pub was hidden in shadows, but Jack's frame was visible through the kitchen window. He was washing plates and cutlery at the sink and singing along with music from the radio mounted on a shelf above his head. He hadn't heard her arrive. He was wearing yellow gloves and an apron around his waste. Occasionally he coughed and spat phlegm into the garbage bin. Mary stepped out of the car.

From the back seat she took an ice-cream container, which held the crucifix she'd found on Donald's grave. She made her way up onto the back steps and knocked on the door.

Jack greeted her with a tea towel over his shoulder.

'What you got there, love?'

Mary stepped inside and followed Jack upstairs.



Goldie sat on the edge of her bed and slid a thin cotton nightdress over her naked torso. The goose stood at the foot of the bed watching.

'Would you like to join me?' she said, patting the bed covers.

The goose leapt up onto the mattress.

Goldie turned down the blankets and the goose nestled between the sheets with her.



Laying on her side, Goldie placed a hand on the creature's back. It turned to face her and gently unfurled its wing down the length of her thigh. The heat from the bird's body warmed her.

She caressed the bird's head and ran her hand down its neck.

The bird slid its wing up her torso, brushing her breast.

Goldie closed her eyes. She could feel the bird's breath on her neck. Blood rushed to her cheeks.



## - FEELING GUILTY -

At dawn, Kevin was woken by the phone in his office. He stumbled downstairs to his desk and lifted the receiver. His mouth was dry. His voice croaked as he spoke.

'The *Advertiser*. Dwyer here.'

'Kevin,' a woman said softly. 'It's me.'

Kevin sat and sighed.

'What do you want?'

'It's good to hear your voice. How are you?'

'I'm fine.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' the woman asked.

'Please don't,' Kevin said.

'I need an explanation.'

'I'm sorry. I can't. Stop calling me.'

Kevin hung up, went back upstairs and drank the glass of water Travis had left for him next to his bed.



'I thought we'd have breakfast out here,' Jack said, leading Mary onto the pub balcony. 'How do you take your eggs?'

'However they come,' she said. 'Don't go to too much trouble.'

Jack smiled.

'No trouble at all.'

He disappeared inside.

Mary took in the view along Monty Street. A lone car rolled down the road and pulled up out the front of the newsagents.

Pat emerged from the driver's door and stepped onto the footpath.

'Hurry up, Nancy,' she said.

Her voice carried easily to Mary on the balcony.

Nancy appeared from the passenger seat and scurried after Pat into the newsagents. Mary ducked into the shadows of the verandah and hoped she had not been seen.

She felt guilty. She had spent the night with Jack. Nothing untoward, just chit chat over shots of whiskey with ice and dry ginger ale. She had showed Jack the crucifix she'd found on Donald's grave and confessed to wondering if Donald was haunting her.

'Not even twenty four hours in the grave and he's sending me messages,' she said.

She asked Jack what she had done wrong and whether he thought she deserved the way things had turned out.

Jack had held her in his arms, rubbed her back with his palms and whispered into her ear.

'Nothing wrong with you, love.'

Then, when she had finished her drink, he made up the bed in one of the guest rooms, gave her a clean towel and pointed her to the bathroom.

It was innocent, Mary told herself, just two good friends catching up on old

times.

Jack returned to the balcony with two large plates of breakfast.

'The eggs started out poached but ended up scrambled,' he said.

Mary stepped out from her hiding place.

'Looks great.'

Jack handed her a plate and encouraged her to sit.

'Thanks,' she said, leaning in to peck him on the cheek.



Down on the street Pat and Nancy were setting up the trestle table for the raffle.

Nancy spotted Mary on the balcony and Pat followed her gaze.

She said nothing, but Nancy could tell Pat was not impressed.

## **- A STRANGE MIX -**

Bianca was at her station when Travis entered the newspaper office carrying a shoebox.

'The boss in?' he said.

Bianca shuffled some papers in front of her to make it look like she was busy, then looked up.

'What did you get up to last night?'

'Had a few beers.'

'Private party for two was it?'

'Hardly. Your boss isn't quite the drinker you are.'

Bianca blushed.

'What's in the box?'

'None of your business.'

Bianca scowled.

'Go in,' she said.



When Travis entered Kevin's office, the reporter was leaning over a glass of aspirin. His face was pale. He did not look up.

'You forgot this,' Travis said, placing the shoebox on the desk.

Kevin lifted the lid and saw the feathers inside, resting on tissue paper.

'I reckon it might be good to put a picture of them in the paper. Maybe someone will be able to make sense of them,' Travis said.

Kevin looked up into the shire maintenance worker's eyes and smiled.

'Sorry for passing out like that,' he said.

'No worries. Was my fault. Should've had some wine.'

Kevin took a deep breath. Travis could see that he was agitated.

'You wouldn't have seen much of the place cooped up in here all the time,' he said. 'How 'bout a drive later. I can show you some of the sights.'

'That'd be nice,' Kevin said.



Alexander fumbled with a set of keys at the back door of the *Emperors Dragon* and entered the restaurant's empty, darkened kitchen. The smell of garlic, onions and fish sauce drew him to the fridge. Inside he found a bowl of cold noodles mixed with chicken, bok choy and bean shoots. He splashed chilli sauce on top and ate the dish vigorously with a fork.

When he was done, he wandered into Lynne's bedroom and sat on the bed. Soft morning light came through the open curtains. He patted the pillow and smoothed the creases in the quilt, then pulled open the bedside drawer.

Lynne had left a pair of her underwear behind. Alexander held them in front of his face. They were made of red lace and were see-through. He put them to his nose, closed his eyes and inhaled.

He pictured, for the first time, what his and Lynne's child might look like. He

imagined a boy, a son, with Lynne's jet-black hair and almond eyes combined with his own pink cheeks and fat limbs. It would be a strange mix, he thought. Like mashed potato with soy sauce. Next he pictured Lynne spread out on a table in the doctor's surgery with tubes in her arms and a nurse hovering at her side with a towel. Soon it would all be over, and she would come home and they would get back to the way things were.

Alexander looked out the bedroom window. He could see all the way up to the ruins of St Agathas on the ridge. He saw two figures wandering through the gravestones in the cemetery and got up to take a closer look.



'That's where I found it,' Mary said, pointing to Donald's grave.

Jack bent down and inspected the soil beside the headstone.

'This can be explained,' he said.

Mary stood over him.

'It's Goldie,' he said.

Jack got to his feet and placed an arm around Mary's waist.

'Just paying her respects.'

Mary rested her head on his shoulder.

'Do you think she had anything to do with the fire?'

Jack shrugged.

'Probably not. But she'll get the blame for it anyway.'

Clouds above them parted and Mary saw blue sky for the first time since



Donald's death. She took Jack's hand.

'I want to show you something,' she said.

Mary led him through the cemetery to Ginny Peddley's headstone.

'She was a good girl,' Jack said.

'She was too much like me for her own good,' Mary said.



Ginny Peddley had been Mary's only child, a spirited young girl with bright red hair, who left home and school when she was fifteen to take up a job and a room at the *Taylors Arms*.

As a child she had been a delight to both Mary and Donald. She had cheered their empty marriage with her radiant smiles and infectious laughter and bonded them as a family. When she was a young girl the three of them spent weekends fishing and picnicking by the creek, and went on caravanning holidays to the coast.

For many years Mary was able to put the thought that she had married the wrong man out of her mind. Donald was a good second best, she had convinced herself.

Though she did not mean her parents any real harm, Ginny's rebellion brought everything good in their lives to a halt. She lost interest in school early on. By her fourteenth birthday she had stopped turning up, instead spending her days hanging around the beer garden at the pub, chatting to truck drivers and travelling salesmen who were passing through town.

When Donald caught her sitting up at the bar with Jack Diamond one day he dragged her home and grounded her for a month.

'What the bloody hell do you think you are doing?' he said. 'He's old enough to be your bloody father.'

Mary had been dismayed and gone to see Jack.

'Don't ever lay a finger on her. Got it?'

Jack defended himself.

'I've told her to stay away,' he said. 'But she won't listen. She's just like you. Better she's here than wandering the streets or taking off with some blow in.'

Mary took Ginny aside when she finally got her home.

'Do you love him? Is that what this is all about Ginny?' she asked.

'He understands me, mum,' Ginny said. 'That's all.'

When Ginny announced she was leaving school to take on waitressing work at the pub, Donald evicted her.

'Go there and you never come back,' he said.

Mary had been filled with dread, but felt there was nothing she could say.

Jack had offered Ginny a job and board on the understanding that they were going to have a professional relationship only.

'Out of respect for your mother,' he told her.

But Ginny, prone to the whimsy of her adolescent emotions, took no notice.

At the end of her first week away from home Ginny had a suggestion to end a long hot day.

'Let's go swimming.'

Jack drove her in his ute to one of the swimming holes out of town and they both

undressed to their underwear. They swam energetically, circling one another in the water.

'I love this,' Ginny said. 'You make me feel free.'

When they got out of the water Ginny pulled out a bottle of whisky she had secreted from the bar in her clothes.

'Thought you might like a drink,' she said.

Jack had wanted to be angry with her, but found he couldn't be.

'I'd love one, but you won't be having any.'

They sat on the grass and watched the sun set. Jack relented to Ginny's requests for whisky and gave her a sip. Just a small one. Barely a shot.

But she asked for another.

Jack shook his head. She put her arms around his shoulders and kissed him on the mouth.

'No way,' he said, pushing her away.

Ginny picked up her clothes and ran to the ute, locked herself inside and started the engine.

'Don't be stupid,' Jack said running after her.

The ute lurched forward and Jack managed to jump onto the tray before Ginny took off. She speed through the bush, along a dirt track. Jack had to duck to miss being struck by overhanging branches.

'Slow down,' he said, thumping the roof with his fist.

Ginny turned to look at him and did not see the approaching bridge. The ute collided with the railing, flipped into the air and landed upside down in creek.

Ginny was trapped inside and drowned. Jack's right leg was pinned under the wreckage and it had to be severed above the knee before rescuers could drag him from the water.



'I've never had a chance to ask you this,' Jack said, turning to Mary. 'Do you blame me?'

Mary looked up at him.

'I think we need to talk a few things over.'

## - OUT IN THE OPEN -

Mid afternoon Goldie found the goose pacing back and forth at her back door. It stopped occasionally to peck at the keyhole and honk.

‘We don’t go out,’ Goldie said.

The bird followed her to the kitchen and prodded her ankles with its beak as she prepared their dinner.

Goldie realised she was being unfair.

‘I don’t go out. Unless its dark,’ she said. ‘If you behave, we’ll go later.’

After dinner, Goldie took a bucket from the laundry and led the goose to back door. She unlocked it, and gave the bird a stern warning.

‘No going outside the fence. Got it?’

The goose honked and Goldie ushered it onto the verandah. It waddled to the steps and warily followed her down into the vegetable patch.

Goldie crouched to dig in the soil. She deposited seeds and grasses into the bucket. The bird gobbled weeds and insects.



Teresa emerged from the back door of the real estate office and dumped rubbish in a bin. She was running late for the town meeting at the pub, but was distracted by faint voices further down the street. It sounded like a woman talking to a squealing

child. She followed the voices to the parameter of the old milk bar. There was a small gap in the back fence and she peeked through.

She saw Goldie standing in the middle of her yard in waist high weeds and grass. Her hair was tied back and she was wearing an apron.

‘Don’t you get too dirty,’ Goldie said, talking to someone moving through the grass in front of her.

Teresa strained to see who she was talking to.

‘And leave off my Geraniums,’ Goldie said.

Suddenly a toddler, a small boy Teresa thought, with a long nose and a head of downy golden hair, wearing nothing but a nappy, stepped into a clearing in the yard.

Teresa gasped.

Goldie heard her.

‘Time to go inside,’ she said to the bird.

Teresa ran back to the real estate office trying to make sense of what she had seen.



Alexander stood at the bar in the *Taylors Arms* flipping through a pile of prompt cards and wondering where Teresa had got to. The meeting was due to start and he felt unnerved without his wife at his side.

Pat and Nancy had taken up the front row seats. Bianca and Kevin sat behind them. Travis stood at the back with Mary and Jack.

‘Thank you all for coming,’ Alexander said.

He glanced down at the cards in his hands and tried to find his starting point.

The cards were out of order. He resorted to speaking off-the-cuff.

‘By now you’re all probably wondering what this meeting is about,’ he said

He cleared his throat and put his hands on his hips.

‘The events of the past few days have cast a dark shadow over our community and I thought it important to reassure you all that, as President of the shire, I have everything under control.’

Pat sat forward in her chair and raised her hand like a precocious student hoping to point out a flaw in her teacher’s presentation.

‘What’s happening about St Agathas?’ she said.

Alexander returned to his cards and searched for a response. The cards were completely muddled now. He took a deep breath.

‘In an endeavour to get to the bottom of who is responsible for the fire which destroyed our precious church we have to ask ourselves, who in this community is capable of committing such a malicious and heinous act?’ he said.

He marched to the back of the room and coming to a standstill at the window looking out onto Monty Street.

‘I think we all know, in our hearts, there is only one person living amongst us who is deranged enough to inflict this type of harm.’

He raised a hand and pointed down the street in the direction of the old milk bar.

‘I knew it,’ Pat said, standing militantly. ‘I’ve known it all along. That witch is behind all of this. It’s time something was done about her once and for all.’

Alexander marched back to the front of the gathering and reached for a pile of documents on a table next to him.

‘Mrs Thompson is right,’ he said. ‘And I have just the plan to rid our community

of this troublemaker.'

He handed the pile of documents to Nancy.

'Take one and pass them on,' he said.

When everybody in the room had a copy, Alexander began his explanation.

'The torching of St Agathas, whilst a great loss, marks a new beginning for Baxter Creek. If you turn to the second page you'll see an outline of a proposal the shire has been developing for some time.'

He watched his audience refer to the detailed map. Pat took glasses from her handbag and studied the document. Kevin skimmed over the diagrams and flipped through to the budgets at the back. Jack frowned at the designs.

'The *A J Bourke Arcade*,' Alexander said, launching into his sales pitch.

He stepped forward, gesturing in the air.

'This is most exciting development in Baxters Creek in a generation. The arcade will be a world class multi-storey shopping and entertainment complex right in the heart of town. It will attract a new wave of visitors to the area, and put Baxters Creek on the map,' he said.

'But what about that woman?' Pat said, still standing.

Alexander glared at her.

'If you turn to page three ladies and gentleman, you'll note that the arcade is to be partly built on the site of the old milk bar. The council plans to acquire the milk bar, evict its owner and demolish the building that is currently nothing more than a blight on our streetscape.'

'And St Agathas?' Pat said.

'Proceeds from the rental returns on the arcade will go directly towards



rebuilding the church,' Alexander said. 'I propose we take a vote now, so the council can take immediate action.'

Kevin stood and drew the attention of the room.

'This seems rash,' he said. 'It hasn't yet been determined that the fire was deliberately lit. There's a lot more going on here than any of us realise.'

He reached down and held aloft to the room a shoebox he had been hiding under his seat.

Travis and Mary exchanged concerned looks.

'These were found in the grounds of St Agathas the morning after the fire. They indicate there may be other factors at play here,' Kevin said.

He took the lid off the box and revealed the clump of blood stained golden feathers.

Before anyone could respond, the entire gathering was distracted by Teresa bursting in through the pub's front doors.

'Alex,' she said, out of breath. 'I need to speak to you in private.'

'This is a public forum,' he said. 'Let's keep everything out in the open.'

Teresa bit on her thumb nail. She made her way to Alexander's side and fortified herself to make the announcement.

'I have something rather disturbing to report,' she said. 'That Sullivan woman. She's got a baby in her backyard. I saw it with my own eyes.'



Travis and Kevin stood outside the *Taylors Arms* and watched as the gathering disbanded. Alexander and Bianca drove Teresa away. Mary and Jack disappeared

upstairs.

'Wait till I tell Mabel about this,' Pat said, leading Nancy back to her place with the intention of getting on the phone.

'Feel like a drive?' Travis said.

Kevin checked his watch.

'Sure.'

Betty was asleep on the seat in Travis' ute.

'Move over,' he said.

Betty sat up and let the two men fastened their seat belts, then she curled up again, resting her head on Kevin's lap.

'Push her off if she's annoying you.'

'She's fine,' Kevin said, stroking the top of Betty's head with the back of his hand.

Travis steered the ute up Monty Street and drove out of town.

'This is a favourite spot of mine,' he said.

He brought the ute to a standstill at a lookout high up on the ridge beyond St Agathas. He switched off the engine and the lights from Baxter Creek and surrounding farm houses twinkled like jewels scattered across the valley floor.

'It's beautiful,' Kevin said, winding down the window and taking in the fresh air.

The men sat in silence.

'What do you make of Bourke's plans?' Travis finally asked.

'Doesn't add up,' Kevin said. 'The woman in the milk bar. The fire at the church. It all seems a little too convenient for my liking.'

Travis unbuckled his seat belt and turned to the reporter.

'Have you got the hots for Bianca?' he asked.

Kevin opened his mouth but said nothing. He looked down at Betty.

'You've got no worries about that,' he said. 'She's not my type.'

Travis flicked the radio on. The ute filled with audio static. He thumped the dash with his fist and the radio tuned itself to Frank Sinatra.

*Fly me to the moon, and let me play among the stars.*

*Let me see what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars.*

*In other words, hold my hand.*

*In other words, darling kiss me.*

'Ever had a girl friend?' Travis asked.

Kevin looked up at him.

'I was engaged once,' he said.

Travis leant forward on the steering wheel.

'What happened?'

Kevin searched for the right words to use.

'Got called off.'

'She dump you?', Travis asked

'Not exactly.'

Kevin turned away, looked out the ute window and listened to the song lyrics.

*Fill my heart with song and let me sing forever more.*

*You are all I long for, all I worship and adore.*

*In other words, please be true.*

*In other words, I love you.*

'Another man was involved,' he said.

'Shit. Sorry, mate,' Travis said. He placed a hand on Kevin's shoulder.

Kevin turned to face him. Travis' dark eyes were filled with concern.

Betty stirred between them.

'It's gettin' late,' Kevin said. 'Better get me home.'

## **- SOMETHING YOU SHOULD KNOW -**

'There's something you should know,' Goldie said to the bird.

She led the creature into the shop and stopped at the front door. She looked out onto Monty Street through the masking on the window and saw that it was dark and clear of night traffic.

'Come with me,' she said.

She unlocked the door and ducked under the corrugated iron barricading the top half of the entrance, stepping onto the footpath out the front of the shop. The bird followed.

Under the cover of darkness Goldie led the goose past *Bourkes Real Estate* office

and the office of the *Valley Advertiser*, and crossed the road into Memorial Park.

‘Let’s sit here,’ she said, leading the bird to a park bench.

She helped the bird onto the seat and then sat next to it.

‘I’d rather you heard it from me, the way it really was.’

The goose climbed onto her lap and rested its head on her shoulder. Goldie wrapped her arms around it.

‘His name was Daniel. Daniel Thompson,’ she said. ‘I didn’t mean him any harm.’



Goldie’s affair with Daniel Thompson unfolded quickly. The boy, though he insisted he was a man, made daily visits to the milk bar and flirted with Goldie while the other school kids played marbles and fought over confectionery out the front.

Goldie had tried not to encourage his behaviour, but in the absence of any other male attention, she did enjoy it. He would bring her flowers he’d picked from the side of the road on his way to the shop after school. He took an interest in the merchandise in the shop beyond the lollies and sweets. He quizzed her on how to use the jars of pastes and sauces on her shelves in cooking. Sometimes he paid her to make him sandwiches and milkshakes, and as she did he would be transfixed. Goldie was flattered, and convinced herself it was innocent.

One night, during the summer school holidays Daniel arrived on her back porch. He’d stolen some grog from his parents and had shared it with some of his mates down by the creek, and after the others had taken off home, pissed, he’d decided to pay Goldie

a visit.

The appearance of his dark figure in the doorway startled Goldie.

'You shouldn't be here,' she warned him.

'Just wanted something to eat,' he replied, pushing his way into the house.

'The shop's closed. Come back tomorrow,' Goldie said, slightly alarmed.

Daniel took a seat in her lounge room and hiccuped. Goldie could tell he was drunk.

'Please don't send me home,' he said. 'Mum'll kill me.'

Goldie felt sorry for him.

'Stay here. I'll make you some coffee and you can sleep it off on the couch.'

While she stood at the stove waiting for the kettle to boil, Goldie felt the boy's hands around her waist and clumsily make their way up onto her breasts. The suddenness and firmness of the action took her breath and voice away. She found herself unable to protest. Daniel turned her to him and pressed up against her. His lips were hard on Goldie's face, he dug his fingers into her back and pulled her close. Goldie could feel his erection, harder and larger than she had imagined, pressing against her thigh.

'Wait,' she said, pushing him away.

He unbuttoned the top of her dress and slid a hand into her bra, feeling for and then pinching her right nipple.

'I love you,' he whispered into her ear, prodding at her crotch with the fingers of his other hand.

Just this once, Goldie thought, allowing herself to succumb to Daniel's advances.

The lovemaking on the kitchen floor was rough, but pleasing. Despite being

twice his age, Goldie had had fewer sexual encounters than Daniel. He'd had intercourse with three of the girls from his school. He was comfortable and gregarious. He seemed to know exactly what he was doing. For Goldie, it was an education. She found herself doing things she hadn't even contemplated before. It was terrifying and wonderful.

Afterwards, Daniel made his intentions clear.

'This can be our little thing,' he said. 'No one has to know.'

And from that point it became a regular thing. On a nightly basis, under the cover of darkness, Daniel would sneak out of his parents farmhouse, ride his bike into town, enter the milk bar via the yard at the back, and climb into Goldie's bed.

It wasn't long before people started to talk. There were sightings of the boy riding through town in the early hours of the morning and word reached Daniel's mother Pat that something wasn't right at the milk bar.

'You've put a spell on my son,' Pat said, confronting Goldie in the shop one morning. 'Stay away from him.'

Goldie tried to warn Daniel, but he refused to back away and resolved a different solution. He took the matter up with his father, Brian.

'I love her, dad,' he said. 'I want to marry her.'

Brian Thompson had told his son he was thinking with his cock and threw him out of the family house.

'Don't come back until you're thinking with your head,' he said.

Goldie hadn't known what to do except welcome Daniel into her home. She

knew it was not a sensible decision, but it was the only way she could see forward. It was illogical, and would do neither of them any favours. She was old enough to be his mother. It was probably even illegal in some places, but she had fallen in love too.



‘I took him from them,’ Goldie said to the goose asleep in her arms. ‘That’s why they hate me.’

She rocked the bird gently and sang.

*Oh your Daddy’s rich,*

*An’ your Mama’s good looking.*

*So hush little baby, don’t you cry.’*



Kevin climbed from Travis’ ute out the front of the *Advertiser*.

‘Thanks. Sorry I wasn’t better company,’ he said.

‘No worries,’ Travis said. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’

Kevin watched him drive off up the street.

As Travis approached the bridge leading out of town, a car swerved across the road and almost clipped his ute.

‘Bloody hell,’ he said, honking his horn.





In the offending vehicle, Lynne had momentarily lost control of the wheel.

‘Sorry,’ she said, tooting back and waving as Travis drove by.

She pulled into the kerb beside Memorial Park to get her bearings. She’d been in a daydream the whole drive from Corriford. She looked out the window and, in the dark, she saw a woman sitting on a park bench with a child in her arms.

Lynne drove off toward the *Emperors Dragon* convinced Buddha was sending her some kind of message.

## - LUNCHTIME SPECIALS -

Jack led Mary down the street to the *Emperors Dragon*.

'You open for lunch, love,' he called out, entering the restaurant.

'Please. Yes,' Lynne said, rushing in from the kitchen.

She took Mary's jacket.

'Its lovely in here,' Mary said.

Lynne led them to a table by the window.

'Two of your lunchtime specials, thanks,' Jack said.

When Lynne had left them, Jack reached across the table and took Mary's hand.

'What are your plans for the farm? Are you going to sell up and move into town?'

Mary said nothing. She stared out the window, adjusted the collar of her blouse and tucker hair behind her ears.

'Would you prefer a table at the back?' Jack asked.

Mary took Jack's other hand.

'Before he died, Donald said he *knew*,' she said.

'Knew what?'

'He *knew* what I knew. He *knew* what you don't.'

Jack frowned.

'You aren't making much sense, love.'

'Ginny,' Mary said. 'She wasn't Donald's. She was yours.'

Jack let go of Mary's hands, got up from his seat and did not look back as he exited the restaurant.



'Thank Christ you're back,' Alexander said, entering the *Emperors Dragon* kitchen.

He wrapped his arms around Lynne and buried his face in her neck.

'Hasn't been the same here without you,' he said.

He turned her to face him.

'How did you go?'

'Okay.'

'Did it hurt?'

'No pain.'

Alexander kissed her and massaged her lower back with his fingers.

'It's been a bloody circus here since you left,' he said.

He took a box of condoms from his back pocket and showed them to her.

'Thought we could get back into the swing of things.'

Lynne pushed him away and went to the fridge. Sex was the last thing on her mind.

'So he was good, that Dr Phillips?' Alexander said.

'I don't know.'

'What?'

'I keep my baby,' Lynne said, turning to face him. 'No more chances for me. I tell

no one.'

'We'll that's just bloody marvellous.'

Alexander threw the condoms onto the floor and stormed out the way he'd come in.



Mary was sitting with her head in her hands when Lynne came out with a plate of complimentary prawn crackers.

'I join you?' Lynne asked.

Mary looked up and nodded. She saw a sorrow in Lynne's expression which mirrored her own.

'What are these?' she said.

'Deep fried prawn cracker. Make you thirsty.'

Mary took one and bit into it. It crackled on her tongue.

'This is good,' she said.

The two women ate in silence.

## - ON DISPLAY -

After lunch Goldie stamped her fist on the kitchen table. She'd spent all night and morning worrying about the sightings she'd exposed herself and the goose to. Teresa Bourke had spied them in the yard. The young Asian woman from the *Emperors Dragon* had caught them sitting in Memorial Park. It was only a matter of time before someone turned up on her doorstep seeking answers. She put on her coat and hat.

'Better we go to them,' she said to the bird.



Mary and Lynne, sitting in the window of the *Emperors Dragon*, saw the pair emerge from the front door of the milk bar.

Lynne pressed her face to the window.

Mary took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes.

'She have baby?' Lynne asked.

'Not that I'm aware of, love,' she said.



Teresa caught sight of Goldie and the bird as they passed by the real estate office window. She froze in the chair behind her desk and watched them waddling up the street. She reached for the telephone and dialled the number for the *Advertiser*.



'What? She's where? She's got what with her?' Bianca said down the telephone, sitting at her desk in the newspaper office.

She listened to her mother's frantic voice and then hung up when she saw Goldie holding open the front door for a small golden bird.

'You can't bring that thing in here,' Bianca said, standing.

Goldie led the bird to the counter. It stood behind her, half hiding in the tail of her coat.

'I'd like to see the editor,' she said.

Bianca strained over the counter to see where the bird had gone.

'Kevin,' she called out.

Kevin came from his office and saw a large woman with gentle eyes and a soft round face standing in the foyer. She wore a long grey overcoat and had wild grey hair.

'Kevin Dwyer,' he said, holding out his hand. 'What can I do for you?'

'I'd like to request an interview,' Goldie said.

'Please, come this way,' Kevin said, ushering the woman and the bird into his office.

Goldie sat opposite Kevin and the goose stood on the floor next to her.

'And who have we got here?' Kevin said.

'He doesn't have a name,' Goldie said.

'Where did he come from?'

Goldie looked up and pointed to the sky.

‘It was an accident,’ Goldie said. ‘Lightning struck the bird, and then the bell tower at St Agathas, triggering the blaze. I saw the whole thing. It was a random act of nature. Sometimes things like this happen.’

Kevin scribbled furiously as Goldie described the events that led her to discover the goose. It was extraordinary, career-defining stuff. An exclusive. Definitely front page material, he thought.

‘Can I get a photograph to go with this?’ he asked.

Goldie looked at the goose.

‘That’d be nice,’ she said.

Kevin grabbed his camera and took a portrait of the woman with the bird sitting on her lap. He could already see the headlines:

**BLAZE MYSTERY SOLVED**  
**LIGHTNING BLAMED FOR CHURCH FIRE**  
**INJURED BIRD FOUND IN DEBRIS**  
**EXCLUSIVE EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT**  
**MILK BAR WOMAN SPEAKS**

When the woman and the bird were gone, Kevin got busy at the typewriter.



Goldie and the bird exited the *Advertiser* and crossed Monty Street.

Out the front of the news agency they were spotted by Pat and Nancy.

'What on earth?' Pat said, stepping backwards and clasping her bag over her heart.

'G-g-goldie,' Nancy said.

Goldie stopped and starred at the women. The bird stood at her side for a moment and then waddled toward Nancy.

'W-w-what's this?'

Pat stepped forward and swung her handbag over the bird's head.

'Shoo.'

The bird ducked. Goldie stepped forward and grabbed hold of Pat's bag.

'Please don't,' she said.

Pat freed the bag from Goldie's grip and took Nancy by the arm.

'We're leaving,' she said, pushing Goldie out of the way.

Goldie led the goose into the newsagents. Mabel Simpson was behind the counter but did not recognise either of them.

'Can I help you?' she said.

'Mabel. It's me, Goldie Sullivan. From the milk bar.'

'Oh,' Mabel said.

'I just wanted to apologise for the chilli paste. I should have warned you.'

'That was a long time ago,' Mabel said.

'Well, I should have said sorry then but I didn't, so I'm saying it now.'

Mabel looked at the goose standing next to Goldie.

'How old is the little one?'

'Just a baby,' Goldie said.





From his room, Jack saw Goldie exit the newsagents with a bird at her side. He went downstairs to greet them.

‘Been a long time,’ he said when Goldie walked through the door of the pub.

He came out from behind the bar and placed a hand on Goldie's upper arm. He smiled then saw the bird standing in the folds of her skirt.

‘Who’s this then?’

Jack bent over at the hips and put his hand out to the bird’s beak. The bird nibbled on his finger tips and stepped to him.

‘It’s good to see you both,’ he said. ‘What can I get you?’

‘The usual,’ Goldie said.



Betty stood and barked when she saw a woman and a bird arrive at the Memorial Park. Travis looked up from raking.

‘Stay, Betty,’ he said.

Betty sat and watched the intruders, her tongue hanging from the side of her mouth.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ Travis said.

Goldie led the bird to a park bench. The goose watched as she took a swig from a bottle of scotch, and then it wandered across the lawn eating grass and leaves.

'Don't go too far,' Goldie said.

Betty could not contain her curiosity. She took off across the park to inspect.

'Betty,' Travis said, calling out. 'Get back here.'

He dropped his rake and went running after her.

Goldie saw a dog and a young man darting across the park toward her. She scanned for the bird and saw its head poking up through a pile of leaves.

'Come,' she said.

The goose saw the approaching dog. It honked and hissed, stood tall, extended its wings and flapped. Leaves were propelled into the air.

Betty, Travis and Goldie arrived at the same time. Travis grabbed Betty's collar and held her back. She snarled, but sat. Goldie put her hand out to the goose and it came to her side.

'Sorry about that,' Travis said.

Goldie patted the bird's head and looked up at him.

'You the Handley boy?'

Travis nodded.

'And this is Betty,' he said.

The bird waddled forward and Betty growled. It honked in return and then reached out with its beak to touch Betty's nose. Betty sniffed.

'I don't think she knows what to make of it,' Travis said.

'She's not the only one,' Goldie said.

Travis took a good look at the bird.

'Explains the feathers Betty found at the church,' he said. 'It is a goose?'

Suddenly Betty lunged at Goldie and Travis struggled to keep her back.

'Sorry. I'll tie her up so she doesn't annoy you. Come on Betty,' he said, dragging the dog back to his ute.

Goldie lead the bird back to their picnic.

She took another swig of scotch.

'That's about how old my boy would be,' she told the goose.

At the ute Travis' heart was still pounding in his chest.

'That was her,' he said to Betty. 'That was her.'



'I won't stand for this,' Pat said, bailing Alexander up against the wall in the real estate office. 'It's an absolute disgrace.'

Teresa stood beside her biting her finger nails. Nancy was wringing her hands.

'Calm down ladies. Calm down,' Alexander said. 'I'll sort this out.'

He pushed past them and marched out of the office. The three women followed him up Monty Street.



Down by the creek Goldie waded into the water, following the bird. It swam out ahead of her, slapping the water with the tips of its wings.

‘Stop splashing,’ Goldie said, flicking water back at the bird.

It honked and dove under the water. Only its tail feathers stayed twitching above the surface.

Goldie eased herself further into the creek and swam out to the bird. Her dress flowed through the water underneath her.

The bird bobbed on the surface.

‘Isn’t it lovely here?’ she said.

‘Bloody hell,’ Alexander said, arriving at the edge of the creek with Teresa, Pat and Nancy in tow. Goldie was floating on her back and the bird was circling her.

‘What the hell do you think you are doing?’ he said.

Goldie stood in the water and wiped drops from her face. The bird paddled next to her.

‘You’re breaking by-laws,’ Pat said. ‘This is a threat to public hygiene and safety. Get out.’

‘The woman’s obviously not well,’ Teresa said. ‘She’s lost her marbles.’

Alexander stepped to the edge of the pontoon and cast a shadow across the water.

‘I don’t care what you do in the privacy of your own home Miss Sullivan, but this sort of behaviour is not appropriate in public. Time to move on.’

Goldie ducked under the water and swam to the creek bank.

‘Come on,’ she said to the goose.

Alexander and the three women watched her and the bird until they had disappeared from the park. Teresa clutched her husband’s arm, feeling exhausted but

triumphant.

‘That put her in her place,’ she said.

‘This is just the tip of the iceberg ,’ Pat said, her brow furrowed. ‘She’s up to her tricks again. Mark my words.’

‘I-I-It’s just a bird,’ Nancy said, but her reasoning fell on deaf ears.

## **- BEING COMPLETELY HONEST -**

After dark Kevin drove out to the Handley farm. Travis was sitting on the verandah drinking a beer with Betty resting at his feet.

'Hope you don't mind,' Kevin said, stepping from the car. 'I've got some news.' He waved a folder in the air.

'Take a seat,' Travis said, getting up and nudging Betty out of the way. 'I've got something for you.'

Kevin was surprised, but sat. Betty wedged her nose into his lap and he rubbed her behind the ears.

Travis reappeared with a bottle of wine and two glasses.

'It's just cheap stuff from the pub,' he said.

'Thanks,' Kevin said, struck by the gesture.

He took a glass and watched Travis as he poured. The wine was bright yellow and smelled like blossoms. He took a sip.

'Nice,' he said.

Travis sat and filled his own glass.

'Thought I might give it a go.'

He took a mouthful and swallowed.

'What do you think?' Kevin asked.

'Different,' Travis said. 'Not bad.'

Kevin smiled and showed him the file he'd brought.

'The woman from the milk bar came to see me. Told me her side of the story. I've

written it up. Even got a photo. Would you mind having a look?’

Travis took the file and sipped his wine as he read the article.

‘Lightning,’ he said when he got to the end. ‘Struck the bird and the church? Do you believe her?’

‘I think so. Strange things happen sometimes, and all the evidence fits,’ Kevin said.

He took a sip of his wine.

Travis handed the file back to Kevin. One mystery solved, he thought, but there was something he wanted to know.

‘Sorry if I brought up some bad memories for you last night,’ he said. ‘I didn’t mean to upset you.’

‘It was fine.’

‘Just that I know what its like to have a woman break your heart. Its something we have in common, I reckon.’

Kevin rested his chin on the edge of his glass.

‘I wasn’t completely honest with you,’ he said. ‘My fiancÈe didn’t break my heart. I broke hers.’

‘How?’

‘It was me who was with the other man,’ Kevin said.

Travis stared at him blankly. Kevin glanced down at Betty. She was staring up at him waiting for a more direct explanation. He looked back at Travis and took a deep breath.

‘I like men,’ he said.

Travis said nothing. He got up and went inside taking his glass and the bottle of

wine with him. Betty followed. Kevin drank the rest of his wine in one mouthful, got into his car and drove off down the driveway.



Back in the shop the goose was pacing along the front window.

'I didn't tell you everything,' Goldie said.

The bird came to her and they both sat, Goldie on a chair and the bird at her feet.

'I got pregnant,' she said. 'The child was Daniel's.'

The bird started up and her but was motionless.

'A boy. We had a boy,' Goldie said. 'I called him Thomas.'

She reached out and patted the goose's head.

The bird stood and rested its head on her lap.



When Goldie told Daniel she was pregnant a month after he had moved in to live with her at the milk bar, he flew into a rage.

'I'm not ready for this,' he told her.

'It's foolish, I know,' Goldie said. 'But I want to have it.'

Daniel fled. He stole a car from his parents' farm and drove out of town.

The following day, Pat Thompson came to see Goldie at the milk bar.

'What have you done with my son?' she demanded to know.

Goldie felt obliged to tell her the truth.



‘I hold you responsible for this,’ Pat had said. ‘You put a curse on him, and now I put one on you. May both you and your bastard child rot in hell.’

News of Goldie’s pregnancy and Daniel Thompson’s disappearance spread quickly through Baxters Creek. Overnight, customers stopped coming to the milk bar. Parents banned their children from the shop. Rumours circulated wildly. Grave fears were held for Daniel’s whereabouts. Most accounts of the saga proposed that Goldie had seduced the boy against his will, and then, when he threatened to leave, she killed him.

Goldie closed the shop and spent the duration of her pregnancy confined to the house out the back of the milk bar. She resigned herself to the fact that Daniel was unlikely to return and focused instead on preparing for the arrival of their child. She ordered bulk supplies of grocery items for her and the baby, hoping they would sustain them both for a long time, and gave over her back yard to the creation of vegetable gardens. She withdrew from the outside world. She slept during daylight and worked at night. She barricaded the doors and windows of her house, both inside and out, nailed shut the milk bar door and pasted over the shop windows from the inside.

Thomas Sullivan was born on the floor of his mother’s kitchen, next to the spot where he had been conceived. Goldie endured an entire day of labour and gave birth on her own. The child was small, had golden-white skin, and a long thin neck. Goldie was exhausted, but delirious with joy. He was beautiful.

The child’s arrival was noted in the town. There were no birth notices in the *Advertiser*, but the child’s crying could be heard as far along Monty Street as the Bourkes

Real Estate office and the newsagency across the road.

When Pat Thompson heard her grandchild had been born, she told her husband Brian and their friends that the child's existence was not to be brought to her attention ever again. But her wish was not granted.

In the days that followed, Daniel Thompson returned to Baxters Creek. He appeared in the middle of the night on Goldie's back porch a week after the boy had been born, eager to meet his son. Goldie had found it impossible to refuse him and secretly she hoped for a reunion. She gave Thomas to Daniel and Daniel, cradling the boy in his arms, wept.

As before, Daniel had a plan.

'We'll take him to meet my parents,' he told Goldie. 'I'll ask for their forgiveness. Then we can be a family.'

'No,' she told him. 'You can stay, but we will not go to them.'

Daniel gave the boy back to her.

'They won't ever accept me,' Goldie said.

'But they will accept him. With time,' Daniel said.

'No,' Goldie said. 'I say, no.'

And Daniel left.

Later that night Goldie put Thomas to bed in his cot by the fire. She kissed the boy on the forehead and retired to her own bed. It was the last time she saw her son alive.

Weeks after Thomas' death Goldie received a letter. She found it stuffed under

her back door with no return address. It was from Daniel. In hurried writing it read:

*I left your house and hid in the yard. There was a storm brewing.*

*After you had gone to bed, I crept back inside, and took Thomas from his bed.*

*I wanted mum and dad to see him. Why wouldn't you let me do that?*

*I took Thomas to Memorial Park. It started to rain. There was thunder. Really loud.*

*I thought of coming back to you, but the storm was terrible.*

*I hid under a tree. I had Thomas in my arms. And then it happened.*

*A fork of lightning struck the tree, and then our boy.*

*The force of it threw me to the ground. Thomas was on the ground too. I checked him.*

*He was dead.*

*His face and body were burnt.*

*I didn't know what to do. I panicked.*

*I threw him into the creek.*

*I am a coward.*

*I will never come back.*

*It was an accident.*

*It was a random act of nature.*

*You must believe me.*



Jack was mopping the bar floor when Mary entered the ladies lounge.

'Can I get a drink?' she said.

Jack pretended not to notice her.

'A lemon squash with a dash of gin, thanks.'

Mary placed a hand bag on the counter and withdrew an envelope.

'These are for you,' she said.

Jack looked up and prised the envelope open. Inside was a handful of photographs.

'Pictures of Ginny. I thought you might like them,' Mary said.

Jack flicked through the photographs. One was of Ginny as a baby, wrapped in a blanket in her mother's arms. Another was Ginny as a toddler with a butterfly clip in her hair, riding a tricycle on the back verandah of the Peddley farmhouse. The last one was a photograph of Ginny in her school uniform. A hint of the rebellion she was yet to embark upon was evident in the way she had looked away from the photographer.

'How 'bout that drink?' Mary said.

Jack squeezed fresh lemon into a tumbler and poured a generous splash of gin on top.

'Soda machine is stuffed,' he said. 'You'll have to take it straight.'

Mary smiled.

'You having a beer?'

'I'm off it,' he said. 'Don't feel the best.'

Mary reached for his hand across the bar. He refused.

'Jack.'

'It's not fair,' he said. 'What a fucking waste.'

Mary went to him and put her arms around him.

'I wish you'd told me. I wish I'd known.'

'I'm sorry,' she said.

Jack sobbed onto her shoulder.

'It's not too late,' she said, leading him upstairs to his bedroom.

Jack sat on the edge of the bed whilst Mary undressed him. She removed his trousers and unfasten his prosthetic leg. When he was naked, she undressed and climbed onto the bed with him. She wrapped her thighs around him and kissed him hard on the mouth.

'I love you,' she said.

## **- WORK TO BE DONE -**

'Where's Teresa?' Pat said, entering the real estate office.

Alexander, seated at his desk, was displeased with the interruption.

'She's not feeling the best. What do you want?'

Pat reached in to her bag and pulled out a copy of Alexander's town plan document.

'To discuss this,' she said, throwing the document onto the desk.

Alexander sat up.

'I'm all ears,' he said.

Pat leant forward and placed her hands on the desk.

'If it means evicting that women from the shop and you'll fund the rebuilding of St Agathas you have the full support of the PWB.'

Alexander gestured for Pat to sit and the phone beside him rang.

'What?' he said, answering it.

'Mr Bourke. There's something I need to discuss with you,' Kevin said at the other end of the line.

'Now's not a good time, Dwyer.'

Kevin took a deep breath.

'Come and see me in my office when you're free,' he said, and then hung up.

'Who does he think he is?' Alexander said, returning to his negotiations with the President of the *Purposeful Women's Brigade*.



Goldie sat on the couch in her lounge room with the goose on her lap.

'I don't want to do this anymore,' she said.

The bird jumped to the floor and disappeared from the room.

'I didn't mean you,' Goldie said, calling out.

She heard the bird calling out from the milk bar. She went to inspect and found it tearing away the paper masking the shop's windows. A shaft of morning sun cut through the gloomy interior, particles of dust rising through it. The parameters of the room became visible. An empty fridge with glass doors stood in one corner. There were rows of empty shelves along the main wall and more up behind the counter. A wire display stand stood on an angle in the centre of the room. A dust covered light shade hung precariously above Goldie's head. It was filthy and disorganised, but it still resembled a shop.

The bird turned to her with paper hanging from its beak.

'Come on,' she said. 'We've got a lot of work to do.'

## **- NO EASY WAY -**

Bianca walked through the *Emperors Dragon* dining room and found Lynne in the kitchen.

‘Didn’t you hear the door?’ she said.

Lynne was lighting incense sticks at Buddha’s feet and praying. She broke off from her meditation and turned to Bianca.

‘You should not come here. I busy.’

Bianca put her hands on her hips and huffed.

‘I wanna know what’s going on,’ she said. ‘We had a deal. Why can’t you teach me to cook?’

Lynne felt dizzy and had to steady herself on the bench.

‘I not feel good,’ she said.

Bianca scanned her from head to foot and noticed there was something different about the chef. She’d put on weight at her hips and her belly was slightly swollen. Her chest seemed fuller. Her cheeks were unusually pink.

‘Are you pregnant?’ she said.

Lynne turned away.

‘Who’s the father?’

Lynne was silent.

‘Are you having Kevin’s baby?’

Lynne rushed to the bathroom and shut the door.





'There's no easy way for me to say this Mr Bourke,' Kevin said, sitting upright in the chair behind his desk.

Alexander sat opposite him. His arms were folded across his chest.

'Out with it then, boy,' he said.

Kevin leaned over the desk.

'You can't evict Miss Sullivan from the milk bar on the premise that she torched the church. It didn't happen like that. I've got her whole story documented and I'm printing it in our next edition.'

Alexander was motionless.

'You've got cocky, son,' he said.

Kevin stared back.

Alexander stood and walked slowly around his chair to face Kevin again.

'Your services are no longer required here, Dwyer. Pack your things and go.'



Mary and Jack were walking up Monty Street hand in hand when they spotted Alexander and Pat out the front of the old milk bar.

'Here's trouble,' Jack said, leading Mary across the road.

Pat had pieces of sticky tape attached to the back of her hand and passed them to Alexander who was attempting to post an eviction notice to the front door of the shop.

'I'll need another half dozen to make sure it stays,' he said.

'Perhaps nails might do the job properly,' Pat said.

'What's this about?' Jack said, approaching from behind.

Both Pat and Alexander ignored him. Pat looked Mary up and down.

Mary pushed past and read the notice on the shop door.

'Would you mind explaining this?' she said to Alexander.

'Council business. Compulsory acquisition of land, Mary. Stay out of it,' he said.

'What's your role in all of this?' Mary asked Pat.

Pat tore the remaining strips of tape from her hand.

'It's bad enough you've jumped into bed with another man before your own husband has settled into his grave. Do you have to parade it down the main street as well?'

'That's enough,' Jack said, stepping between the women.

Mary turned to Alexander.

'I was just on my way to see you,' she said. 'I've decided not to sell.'

She took Jack's hand and led him back up the street.

## - MORE TO IT -

Travis was bent on hand and knees weeding a garden bed at the edge of Memorial Park when he saw Kevin coming toward him, waving and calling out.

‘Good news, Travis. Good news,’ Kevin said.

He stopped, out of breath, and put his hands on his hips.

‘I confronted Bourke,’ he said.

Travis stood and brushed soil from his gloves.

‘What’d he say?’

‘Not much,’ Kevin said. ‘But he fired me.’

‘That’s terrible,’ Travis said.

Kevin stepped closer and put a hand on Travis’ shoulder.

‘You’ve got to look at the bigger picture here,’ he said.

Travis stared at the reporter’s face. His cheeks were bright red and his eyes were wide. He looked excited. Happy almost.

‘What’s that?’ Travis asked.

Kevin smiled.

‘The truth.’



Bianca found her mother prostrate on the lounge in the family room. All the lights were off and Teresa was snoring. Bianca sat and nudged her. Teresa stirred.

'That Fontaine woman is up the duff,' Bianca said.

Teresa opened her eyes and sat up groggily.

'She's having Kevin's baby, mum,'

'Are you sure?' Teresa said.

'Who else could it be?'

The two women sat in silence.

Teresa laid back down and closed her eyes again.

'Have you told your father?' she said.

'No.'

Teresa felt for Bianca's hand and squeezed it.

It was not until she had found a pair of red silk underpants in Alexander's jacket pocket that Teresa had cottoned on to what her husband was up to. She knew he had wandering eyes, that he had a greater appetite for intimate relations than she did, and she even suspected he let more than his eyes wander during his business trips to the city, but it had not occurred to her that he had a mistress in town. Not until the red silk underpants.

'There's more to it, Bianca,' she said.

'More?'

'Ask your father.'



The worst part was the cleaning. Goldie had spent all afternoon mopping and

sweeping the floors, scrubbing down the walls and dusting off the shelves and counters. The cash register and the fridge still worked, but Goldie had to climb a ladder to clean the cobwebs hanging from the ceiling and needed nails and a hammer to repair the broken produce shelves. Her arms were sore.

The goose spent the time wandering leisurely around the shop searching for insects.

‘How about helping out?’ Goldie said.

The bird resumed peeling paper from the shop front window and discarded it thoughtlessly around the room.

‘You’re making more work,’ Goldie said.

The bird honked twice and continued on regardless.

By nightfall half of the window was exposed. It was stained with dirt and glue and needed scrubbing, but Goldie could see through onto Monty Street. The yellow street lights came on and shone into the shop.

Suddenly Goldie felt exposed. She moved into the shadows and called the goose to come to her. The bird stood at her side and Goldie rubbed the top of its head with her fingertips.

‘I’m not sure about this,’ she said.



When Travis, Betty and Kevin entered the *Taylor's Arms* Jack and Mary greeted them. Mary was picking at a bowl of peanuts at the bar. Jack was smoking a cigarette. A radio was playing softly in the background.

'We've got some news,' Travis said.

Mary's face lit up. Jack stood and offered his guests a seat.

'Kevin's going to publish Goldie's story, about the church being struck by lightning, in next week's paper.'

Mary clapped her hands and slapped Travis on the knee.

'Does Bourke know about this?' Jack said.

Travis put an arm around Kevin's shoulder.

'Our reporter here confronted him this morning. Bourke sacked him.'

'What?' Mary said. 'He can't do that.'

'It's fine,' Kevin said.

Mary frowned and looked glum.

'Well you better have a drink,' Jack said, walking around the bar.

He poured Kevin a glass of wine and Travis a pot of beer and the four of them sat in silence sipping their drinks.

Betty was sitting at Travis' feet and looked up licking her lips. She was wagging her tail.

Mary and Jack made their three guests dinner; fried eggs, grilled ham and fresh tomato on buttery toast. Kevin was quiet. The eggs were undercooked and the ham tasted old. He fed his toast to Betty while the others weren't watching.

After they'd eaten Jack and Travis did the washing up and Mary and Kevin were left alone in the Ladies Lounge.

'It'd be a terrible shame to lose you,' she said. 'Will you look for work in Baxters Creek?'

'Not sure there's much call for journalists.'

'Perhaps you could do something else.'

Kevin smiled. The idea hadn't occurred to him.

Mary leaned closer and whispered.

'Whatever happens, take good care of him. He hurts easily,' she said.



Alexander arrived home and found Bianca sitting at the kitchen table halfway through her third bottle of beer.

'Hello, love,' he said. 'Good to see a friendly face.'

Bianca leaned forward and burped.

'Is Kevin the father of Lynne's baby?'

Alexander sat at the table, but said nothing.

'Answer me,' Bianca said, thumping the table with a fist. 'Is he?'

'Dwyer? He wouldn't stand a chance. Don't worry about it.'

Bianca took a swig of beer and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

'Well if he isn't. Who is?'

Alexander's gaze fell to his lap.

'Where's your mother?'



Travis walked with Kevin across the road to the *Advertiser*. Betty followed.

'You did a good thing today,' Travis said.

'It was nothing.'

Travis placed his hand on Kevin's arm.

'I still feel bad about your job.'

'Don't,' Kevin said. 'Its the right thing.'

At the newspaper office door Kevin took his keys from his pocket.

'I don't want you to go,' Travis said.

Kevin glanced down at the key in his hand.

'Want another drink? I've got a bottle in the fridge.'

He unlocked the door and Betty ran in.

Upstairs, Kevin handed Travis a glass of white wine and sat at the end of his bed.

'I won't be sorry to leave this flat,' he said.

Travis surveyed the room. It was small and cold, but he felt comfortable in the arm chair.

Betty was asleep on the floor.

'Who broke your heart?' Kevin said.

Travis leant forward.

'Bianca.'

'What happened?'

'Nothing much. I thought I'd found someone to share the rest of my life with. She didn't.'

Kevin looked forlorn.

'When mum died, that nearly killed me,' Travis said. 'And then dad went a few years after her. Felt like everyone was deserting me.'



'You've got Betty,' Kevin said.

Travis stood and grabbed the bottle of wine from the fridge, topped up their glasses then sat next to Kevin on the bed.

'What a pair we are,' he said, raising his glass.

Kevin felt his arm brush up against Travis' and he turned to face him.

The shire maintenance worker had a line of dirt running down the side of his neck. There was a small dry leaf entangled in the curls at the back of his head. His two day old facial hair grew in swirls along his jaw line.

'I wanted to thank you,' Kevin said.

'What for?'

'Being a friend.'

Travis placed his arm over Kevin's shoulder and gave him a squeeze.

'No worries, mate.'

Kevin felt warm in Travis' grasp. He reached out and stroked Travis' cheek with the palm of his hand.

'I'm not sure about that,' Travis said, pulling away slowly.

'Neither am I.'

Kevin leaned forward and kissed him softly on the lips.

## - OPEN FOR BUSINESS -

It was Nancy who discovered the milk bar had reopened. She'd gone down to Monty Street before breakfast to get fresh milk and bread. When she stepped from her car she noticed the sun reflecting off the old shop's windows. The iron barricade across the front door had been removed and there was a welcoming mat on the footpath. She darted across the street for a closer look.

'H-h-hello,' she called out, popping her head through the shop door. 'Anyone h-h-home?'

The bird came rushing in from the kitchen, and Goldie followed close behind.

'T-h-his looks wonderful,' Nancy said.

The goose honked at her and she stepped back.

'Thanks,' Goldie said. 'Don't worry. He doesn't bite.'

Nancy relaxed and the bird came to her. It prodded the folds of her skirt with its beak and rubbed the side of its head against her thigh.

'I think he likes you,' Goldie said.

Nancy smiled and patted the bird's head.

'I-I-I feel dreadful about everything that's happened,' she said.

'There's no need,' Goldie said.

She grabbed a chair and offered it to Nancy. Nancy sat and the bird stood at her knees watching her.

'It must be nice having company,' she said. 'The bird I mean, not me.'

'It is.'

Nancy stroked the top of the bird's head.

'I'd love a dog myself,' she said. 'Not home enough though. Too busy running around town with Pat.'

She suddenly had a surprised look on her face.

'What is it?' Goldie said.

'Nothing,' Nancy said. 'It's just that my stutter seems to have disappeared.'



'I'll have the Businesswoman's Banquet, please,' Teresa said, entering the *Emperors Dragon*.

Lynne approached carefully and led Teresa to a table.

She reached for the napkin, to place over Teresa's lap, but Teresa snapped it off the table and put it there herself.

'I get you pork wontons,' Lynne said. She bowed and disappeared into the kitchen.

She returned moments later with a bamboo steamer and placed it on Teresa's table.

'Join me,' Teresa said.

Teresa lifted the lid of the steamer. Two wontons stared up at her like eyes. She poked one with a fork and put it in her mouth. The wonton skin was hot and slippery on her tongue. She bit into it and then spat it out onto her lap.

'How long has it been going on?' she said.

Lynne sifted in her seat.

'Not long.'

'How far gone are you?'

'Not much.'

Teresa shook her napkin and pieces of wonton rolled onto the floor.

'And you're having it?'

Lynne got up and went to the cash register. She took five one hundred dollar notes from an envelope and placed them in front of Teresa.

Teresa took the money and counted it.

'You can cancel the rest of my order,' she said. 'I've lost my appetite.'

She got up and left, making sure to squash the wonton into the carpet with her foot as she went.



When Bianca arrived at the *Advertiser* she found Travis' ute parked out the front.

She entered quietly. The offices were empty. She climbed the stairs to the flat and listened at the door. She could hear voices. She turned the door handle and went in.

On the bed, Travis was lying on top of Kevin. Both men were naked.

'What the fuck are you doing?' Bianca said.

Travis reached for the sheet to cover himself, and exposed Kevin.

Bianca saw the reporter's erect penis and stormed out.

'Fuck,' Travis said, climbing off the bed and reaching for his pants. 'I better go.'

Kevin sat up.

'Its okay,' he said.

'No its not.'

Travis drew his shirt over his shoulders and nudged Betty gently with his foot.

‘Come on.’

Kevin wrapped the sheet around his waist and followed them downstairs.

‘Travis,’ he said. ‘Wait.’

Travis tore open the door and rushed Betty to the ute.

Kevin stood in the doorway and watched them disappear up the street.



‘You mind the shop. I’ll be back in a tick,’ Goldie said.

The goose was sitting on the counter next to the cash register. It honked and watched her cross the street and enter the *Emperors Dragon* carrying a jar.

‘You’re not well,’ Goldie said, finding Lynne seated in the restaurant.

Lynne shook her head.

Neither woman felt the need for an introduction.

Goldie offered Lynne the jar.

‘It’s herbal tea,’ Goldie said. ‘It’ll settle your tummy. Won’t hurt the baby.’

Lynne unscrewed the lid, and inhaled.

‘You make this?’

Goldie nodded.

‘Come,’ Lynne said. She led Goldie into the kitchen.

‘For you, and the little one,’ she said, handing Goldie a bag of prawn crackers.

Goldie took the bag and noted the creases on Lynne’s face.

‘You worry too much,’ she said.

Lynne lowered her head and began to cry.

Goldie put her arms around her.

‘You’ll be a good mother. I can tell.’



Teresa had seen Goldie leave the shop alone, and her curiosity had got the better of her. She made her way down the street from the real estate office and entered the milk bar.

The bird was resting on the counter. It honked when it saw her.

‘Be quiet,’ Teresa said.

She began nosing about the shop.

The bird jumped to the floor and followed her.

‘Keep your distance,’ Teresa said.

The bird honked and charged at her, hissing.

Teresa grabbed a broom and brought it down on the bird’s head. The bird fell to the floor. It was out cold. Teresa removed her blazer, wrapped it around the bird, and scooped it up off the floor. Then, with the bird in her arms, she ran through the back of the house and disappeared into the shadows of Goldie’s yard.

## **- LET ME GO -**

Kevin had just stepped out of the shower when Alexander came barging into the flat. The shire president's face was bright red and his breathing was fierce.

'I knew you there was something wrong with you right from the start,' he said. 'Get the fuck out of my town.'

'I'm entitled to a few days grace,' Kevin said, clutching at the towel around his waist.

Alexander grabbed Kevin's suitcase from the top of the wardrobe and threw it on the floor. He emptied the contents of the drawers onto the floor and kicked them with his foot.

Kevin put a hand on Alexander's arm.

'Stop it. I'll go.'

Alexander pushed Kevin's hand away and lifted his own fist into the air.

It came down on Kevin's face once, twice, three times, and Kevin fell to the floor.

'Filthy pervert,' Alexander said.

He kicked Kevin in the stomach twice and left.



Travis pulled up out the front of his farmhouse and climbed out of the ute.

'Come on,' he said to Betty, holding the door open for her.

Betty did not stir.

Travis leant across and patted her head. Still, she did not open her eyes.

‘What’s wrong girl?’

Betty’s breathing was shallow. The tip of her nose was dry and she was shivering.

Travis slid his arms under her, carried her inside and eased her onto the couch. He knelt down and stroked her face. She whimpered. He placed a hand on her side. Each breath she took was shorter than the previous one. Her body was cold.

‘Not now,’ Travis said, tears welling in his eyes.



Mary and Jack found Kevin lying on the floor in the *Advertiser* foyer, naked and bloodied.

‘Get a blanket and a wet towel,’ Mary said to Jack, kneeling down to check Kevin’s pulse.

Jack disappeared upstairs to the flat and Mary took Kevin in her arms. His lips were split open. One eye was dark with bruising and had begun to swell. There was blood oozing from his nostrils.

‘Everything will be all right,’ she said.

Kevin moaned and tried to sit up.

‘Take it easy, love,’ Mary said.

Jack returned with a bucket of warm water and a sponge and threw a blanket over Kevin’s legs and torso. He knelt down too and held Kevin on his lap while Mary dabbed his wounds.



'What on earth?' Nancy said, entering the newspaper office. 'Who did this?'

'I've got a fair idea,' Jack said.

Nancy stamped her foot.

'This has gone too far,' she said.

Goldie suddenly burst through the door.

She saw Kevin's battered face and Mary, Jack and Nancy huddled around him.

'Something dreadful has happened,' she said, out of breath.

Her audience was silent.

'The goose. Someone's taken the goose.'

'Jack. Go with Goldie,' Mary said. 'Nancy and I'll get Kevin across to the pub.'



Teresa was peeling potatoes at the sink in her kitchen. On the stove behind her a large pot of water was on the boil. On the bench there was an oiled roasting dish filled with rosemary and pepper, and a bowl of fresh breadcrumbs.

'It'll be lovely,' she said. 'Just the three of us.'

The goose was unconscious, hanging upside down a hook on the wall. Its legs were bound and Teresa had fastened cooking string around its body to stop its wings drooping down.

Teresa finished off the potatoes and put them in the oven, then laid the bird on the table. She grabbed a fistful of the bird's chest feathers and began tearing them from its flesh.

'Teresa,' Alexander said, entering the room behind her.

Teresa reached for the knife beside her on the table and drew it over the bird's neck.

'Put it down,' Alexander said, marching toward her.

Teresa turned and pointed the knife at him.

Alexander stopped and raised his arms in the air.

'Don't be stupid, Teresa,' he said.

Teresa waved the knife in his face.

'I thought we might have a nice family dinner. Just me, and you, and Bianca.'

'I'm not hungry,' Alexander said.

Teresa stepped closer and held the knife to Alexander's throat. The blade slid between the folds of skin on his neck.

'Been eating elsewhere, have we?' she said.

Alexander grabbed her wrist and twisted the knife out of her hand. It fell to the floor.

'Let me go,' Teresa said.

Alexander released her and she fled to the bedroom.

## - REUNION -

Lynne was sipping soup from a bowl when she heard someone approaching the restaurant through the back yard.

She got up and went to the door.

'Go away, Alexander. I not see you,' she said.

Lynne could hear heavy breathing, but it was not Alexander's. She opened the door and Bianca stepped into the light.

'That thing will be my brother or sister,' she said, pointing to Lynne's stomach.

Lynne nodded.

'Half.'

'You hoping for a boy or a girl?' Bianca said.

'I happy with either,' Lynne said.

Bianca took a pin from her hair and shook the bun from the top of her head.

'Can I come in?' she asked.

Lynne showed her to a chair in the kitchen and gave her a bowl of chicken and sweet corn soup.

Bianca mimicked Lynne's slurping.

'Got any names picked out?' she asked.



'What is it love?' Mary said when Travis entered the front bar at the pub.

His face was white and his eyes were red.

She went to him.

'Betty,' he said.

Mary held him.

'So sorry, love,' she said.

Travis felt numb.

'He's upstairs,' Mary said. 'Go on.'

'Jesus. You look like shit,' Travis said, entering the guest room where Kevin lay on a bed.

'Thanks,' Kevin said, propping himself.

'Just wanted to let you know Betty died this morning.'

Kevin stared at him.

'Come here,' he said.

'No. I'm right.'

'Come here.'

Travis stepped to him.

'Sit,' Kevin said.

Travis sat on the edge of the bed. Tears dropped from the end of his nose onto the sheets.



Pat had had a splitting headache all morning and the whole of her left side was tingling. Her vision was blurry and she felt nauseous.

When Nancy came to her door, Pat was in a foul mood.

'Where have you been? We'll be late setting up the raffle.'

'There's something I want to discuss with you,' Nancy said.

Pat registered a calmness and confidence in Nancy that she had not seen before.

'What is it?'

Nancy reached out and touched Pat's elbow.

'The past is the past. You must let this go. You must accept things are they are.'

Pat pushed Nancy's hand away.

'You're talking nonsense, Nancy.'

'Daniel has gone. He left for his own reasons. You can't blame Goldie for the rest of your life.'

Pat felt dizzy and a hot, sharp pain shot up her back and over her skull.

'Wanna bet?' she said.

Nancy turned to leave.

'Where are you going?' Pat said. 'You've got responsibilities. You can't leave ...'

Nancy looked back just in time to see Pat collapse.



Jack and Goldie arrived out at the Bourke property and found Alexander sitting, staring at the unconscious bird on his kitchen table.

Goldie rushed to it. There was blood on its beak, but it was still breathing. She cradled it into her arms and went to Alexander.

'If your father could see you now,' she said.

Alexander looked away.

'Get out,' he said.

Jack stood between them.

'This is from Dwyer,' he said, raising a fist in the air and punching Alexander on the nose. The force of the blow sent the shire president backwards and he toppled off his chair.

'Let's go,' Jack said, leading Goldie out of the room.

## - PAYING CUSTOMERS -

Goldie kept the milk bar open while she nursed the goose back to health. The bird rested in the afternoon sun in the cot, which Goldie had placed by the front window and as it recuperated Goldie attended to guests and paying customers.

Nancy had stopped by to take the eviction notice from the shop's front door.

'I think this is redundant now, don't you?' she said, tearing it in two.

Lynne had been by for another jar of herbal tea.

'How's he doing?' she asked, leaning over the cot to inspect the bird.

'Like yours,' Goldie said. 'Getting stronger everyday.'

Jack and Mary had been to visit too. They brought Goldie a bottle of whisky and, upon Goldie's insistence, stayed to drink a few glasses of it with her.

When the bird finally regained consciousness later that evening, Goldie held it in her arms.

'I haven't thanked you, have it?' she said.

The bird stared up at her.

'Thank you,' she said.



‘You can put your stuff in here if you like,’ Travis said, leading Kevin to one of the spare bedrooms in the Handley farmhouse.

Kevin went in and placed his suitcase on the bed.

‘This isn’t too fast is it?’ he said.

Travis grabbed Kevin by the waist and pulled him closer.

‘No point trying to stop it now,’ he said.

He leant in, ran his nose up Kevin’s neck and kissed him on the lips. There was a knock at the kitchen door. Both men went to see who it was.

‘Sorry to interrupt you two lovebirds,’ Bianca said. ‘But I’ve got something for you.’

Travis opened the screen door and let her in.

‘Here,’ Bianca said, holding out an envelope to Kevin. ‘It’s a new contract. I’ve taken over the paper from Dad, and I want you back as an editor, but on one condition.’

‘What?’ Kevin said.

‘I’m thinking about applying to do a cadetship. I want to be a reporter. Will you write me a reference?’

‘Sure,’ Kevin said, gesturing for Bianca to take a seat. ‘What would you like it to say?’

‘I don’t care,’ she said. ‘Just no more lies.’



Alexander entered the *Emperors Dragon*.



Lynne looked up at him from the register.

'Teresa has gone,' he said.

Lynne took a menu and showed him to a seat.

'Where she go?' she asked.

'To the city.'

'Should I warn my relative?' Lynne said.

Alexander stood.

'How are you?' he said. 'And how's the little one?'

'Like you, he give me trouble,' Lynne said.

Alexander put his hand on her belly.

'Do you mind?' he said.

'Do you?' she said.



Nancy wedged another pillow under Pat's head, wiped dribble from her chin and brushed the hair from her face.

The stroke had been severe. Pat had lost the use of one whole side of her body and she could no longer speak.

Nancy had felt she wanted to take care of her.

'Now have I told you the latest news?' she said to Pat. 'Alexander's resigned from the council and there'll be an election for a new mayor. I haven't made up my mind yet, but I'm thinking of nominating.'

Pat groaned and tried to speak. She could only manage a grunt.

'I'll campaign for St Agathas to be rebuilt,' Nancy said. 'But the shopping

complex won't be going ahead now that Goldie's milk bar is open again.'

A glob of saliva spilled down Pat's chin and Nancy leant over her to wipe it.

'I better get going,' Nancy said. 'I've got the raffle to organise. I'll pop by and see you later on.'

## **- TIME FLIES -**

Goldie sensed something was going to change when the goose woke her in the middle of the night, tickling her on the neck with its beak.

The bird got off the bed and went to the door at the front of the shop.

Goldie dressed and followed.

‘Now?’ Goldie asked. ‘Does it have to be now?’

The bird honked and tapped the door handle with its beak.

Goldie got the key and unlocked it. The bird waddled out onto the footpath and headed across Monty Street.

‘Wait for me,’ Goldie said, rushing after it.

When they arrived up on the ridge the bird walked through the rubble of St Agathas, pecking at pieces of burnt timber and charcoal.

Goldie watched and tried to not let her sorrow overwhelm her.

The goose leapt on top of the bell.

‘I know,’ Goldie said. ‘You have to.’

The bird flapped its wings and lifted gently into the air.

A gust of wind blew up the hill. The bird ascended further, like a balloon set free at a children’s birthday party. It drifted across the tree tops and floated up into the night sky.

Goldie waved.

The goose disappeared into a large white cloud, and when the cloud had passed,

the goose was gone too.



When Lynne gave birth to a son, she was adamant that she should choose the name.

‘I call him Deng Zhe, like my father.’

‘Dennsy?’ Alexander said.

‘No.’

Lynne took pencil and paper and spelled it out.

‘D-e-n-g Z-h-e,’ she said.

‘Deng Zhe Bourke,’ Alexander said. ‘Has a nice ring to it.’



Kevin picked up the phone in the Handley farmhouse kitchen and dialled. The number rang three times before a woman picked up at the other end.

‘There’s something I wanted to tell you,’ Kevin said.

The woman was silent.

‘I’m sorry for hurting you, but its over now,’ Kevin said.

‘Have you met someone?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

‘So have I,’ the woman said. ‘Goodbye, Kevin.’

‘Good-bye,’ Kevin said, hanging up the phone.



In the milk bar candles were lit and there was jazz playing on the gramophone.

Goldie served Jack a bowl of homemade soup.

‘Nothing for you, Mary?’ she asked.

Mary shook her head.

‘Do you have any photographs of your son?’ she said. ‘I don’t think I ever got to meet him.’

Goldie went to the counter and took a photograph from the drawer near the register.

‘I keep this one with me,’ she said, handing it to Mary.

In the photograph a baby boy was sleeping in a cot next to a stuffed toy bird.

‘He was beautiful wasn’t he?’ Mary said, showing the photo to Jack.

‘Sure was,’ Jack said, slurping his soup.

‘Did you get a picture of the goose before it left?’ Mary asked Goldie.

‘No I didn’t’, Goldie said. ‘But I think Kevin might have.’

Goldie stepped out onto Monty Street with a broom and began sweeping the footpath. A warm gust of wind came down the street and she looked up into the evening sky. It was brimming with stars.